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By HARRY MOORE.



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CHAPTER I.

ATTACKED BY INDIANS.

"Now, I wonder how I am going to get across the river?"

A young man of perhaps twenty years of age sat on the back of his horse, and gazed across the wide expanse of water confronting him. The water was that of the River St. Johns, in Florida, and the time was August in the year 1778. The lone rider was Dick Slater, the captain of the "Liberty Boys," who had made themselves famous by their bravery on the field of battle.

The young man was now on his way to St. Augustine for the purpose of trying to spy upon the British at that point, having been sent by General Robert Howe, who had headquarters at Savannah, Georgia.

As the readers of "The Liberty Boys of '76" know, Dick was famous as a spy, and General Howe, knowing this, had picked upon the youth as being the one to do the work he wished done. He was figuring on advancing down into Florida and attacking General Prevost, the British commander, and he wished to get all the information possible before making the attempt.

Dick had reached the west bank of the St. Johns River, and had drawn rein, and sat there, gazing out over the water, for the river was at least four miles wide. Indeed, it looked more like an elongated lake than a river.

"Jove, I don't see how I am going to get across," said Dick, and at this instant he heard the sound of hoofbeats, and looked around.

A glance was sufficient to tell Dick that the horseman was a redcoat.

His brilliant scarlet uniform was sufficient for that, and as he drew nearer the youth saw that the man was a captain.

"Well, I have a bit the advantage of him, in that I know he is an enemy, while he does not know that I am one," thought the youth.

Dick was dressed in ordinary citizen's clothing, and con-

sequently it was impossible to tell whether he was Whig or Tory by looking at him.

The British officer rode up close beside Dick, and nodded his head in greeting while reining up his horse.

"Good-afternoon, sir," he said, eyeing Dick sharply.

"Good-afternoon," replied Dick, quietly, keeping his eyes on the redcoat.

"Going to cross the river?"

"I wish to cross it, sir."

"But don't know how to go about it, eh?"

"That is about it."

"Well, I am in the same boat."

"I don't think either of us is in a boat," smiled Dick. "If we were we could get across the river."

The officer laughed.

"True," he agreed. "I spoke figuratively."

"I understand."

"You must be a stranger in these parts," remarked the officer.

"I am sir; but I am at a loss to know how you knew it."

"It is simple. If you were not a stranger you would know that there is a sort of ferry a couple of miles farther up the river."

"Ah, is there?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm glad to learn that. Are you going that way?"

"I am."

"Then I will accompany you."

"Very good. Come along."

The officer rode onward, and Dick kept close alongside him.

"My name is Morris McGraw," said the officer, presently; "and I am a captain in the king's service. Do you mind telling me who you are?"

"My name is Amos Harper."

"Amos Harper, eh?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you have no objections to telling me where you are bound for?"

"Oh, no."

"Well?"

"I am on my way to a plantation belonging to my uncle."

"Where is this plantation?"

"I don't know exactly."

"You don't?"

"No."

"How do you expect to find it, then?"

"By hunting for it."

"You know where it is, approximately, do you not?"

"Well, yes; that is, I know it is on the east side of the St. Johns River, and within twenty miles of St. Augustine."

"That isn't very definite."

"Not very. But I guess I will be able to find it sooner or later."

"Perhaps so. By the way, you know I am a British subject. Now supposing you tell me where you stand on the subject?"

"Oh, I'm a loyal king's man, too."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"I am glad to hear that."

"Yes, it makes it more pleasant to be in each other's company to know that we agree on the matter at issue."

"So it does."

It was evident to Dick's sharp eyes, however, that the British captain was not wholly at his ease. He kept his eyes on the youth pretty closely. He was smart enough to know that it was possible that his companion was claiming to be loyal simply to deceive him, and feared that he might find himself attacked if he did not look out.

"Where are you from, Mr. Harper?" asked the captain, after a few minutes of silence.

"From up in Georgia, sir."

"Ah! And why are you going to your uncle's, if I may ask?"

"I'm going to live with him."

"Oh, that's it?"

"Yes."

"Then you had no home up in Georgia?"

"No; my parents are dead, and I have just been working around for several years, but not long ago I got word from my uncle that if I would come down there I might have a home with him."

"I see."

They rode onward in silence for a few minutes. At

the left-hand side was the river, while on the right more or less heavy timber.

Suddenly a negro burst out from among the trees, came running toward the two horsemen, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Injuns, massas!" he cried. "De Injuns done b'e comin', an' dey'll git us all fo' suah!"

The two reined up their horses, and waited till the negro reached them.

"Where are the Indians?" asked Dick.

"Dey're comin', massa! Dey's a-comin'. Yo' had ter be gittin' erway frum heah mighty fas', uv yo' d'wanter lose yo' skulps."

"But what will you do?"

"I dunno. Say, massa, yo' wouldn't let er pore br' man up ahind yo', would yo'?"

"Certainly. Up with you."

The negro hastened to obey, and was soon seated behind Dick. He had scarcely done so when a score of painted savages rushed out from among the trees, and their eyes fell upon the white men the redskins gave utterance to wild yells, and began fitting arrows to their bowstrings.

Dick and the British captain did not wait to be treated to the shower of arrows, however, but spurred their horses forward at a gallop, and when the Indians discharged their arrows the missiles fell short.

Wild yells of rage escaped the lips of the Indians, as they brandished their bows in a threatening manner.

"Oh, yell, you fiends," said the captain, grimly. "Yo' can not hurt us— Ha! look there!"

As the exclamation escaped the officer's lips, he brought his horse to a stop, and pointed ahead. Dick had seen the same thing that had attracted the other's attention, and reined his horse up at the same instant.

There was another party of Indians in the road in front of them, and not a quarter of a mile away.

"An' de woods is full ob de red skoundrels!" gasped the negro.

"What shall we do?" asked the captain.

Dick looked back, and saw that the party behind them was coming toward them at a run, and realized that it was a matter of but a very few moments when the Indians would have himself and companions surrounded.

He happened to glance out into the river, and an exclamation escaped his lips.

"The island," he cried. "Let's swim our horses out to the island."

are enough, there was a small island out in the river, seemingly about half a mile from the shore.

"It's our only chance," said the captain. "Come."

They turned aside and rode down to the water's edge, as the Indians saw what their intended victims were doing wild yells went up from them, and they hastened toward a run.

The captain and Dick urged their horses into the water, the animals were soon swimming toward the island. Dick's horse was so heavily laden, however, as to make hard work for it to swim, and Dick told the negro to get off and swim.

"Catch hold of the horse's tail, and he will pull you along," the youth instructed.

"All right, massa," was the reply. "I done 'fraid ob de Injuns, but I hain't 'fraid ob de water."

The negro slipped off the horse's back, and caught hold of the animal's tail as he went past, and was pulled along through the water.

"Dis yere is jes' lak slidin' down hill, er rollin' off er down," the negro declared, with a grin.

The Indians had now reached the bank of the river, however, and at this instant sent a flight of arrows hurtling through the air. The majority of the missiles fell short, but one or two struck nearby, and one grazed the negro's shoulder, bringing forth a howl from him.

"Ouch—oh!" the negro cried. "Dem red rapskallions done woonded me wid one ob dem arrers ob deir'n."

"Oh, it merely grazed you," said Dick. "You are not hurt."

"Air yo' shore ob dat, massa?" asked the negro, anxiously.

"Yes; you're all right."

"I hopes so, massa. But I tole yo' it feelled jes' like er hot poker hed been stuck inter me."

The Indians let fly another shower of arrows, but all the missiles fell short this time, and a yell of rage and disappointment went up from the fiends.

"We're safe for the present," said Dick. "We are out of reach of their arrows."

"I'm moughty glad ob hit, massa," said the negro.

The horses swam onward, and presently the island was reached.

Pausing on the shore, the fugitives looked back.

The Indians were talking and gesticulating at a great rate, and the negro shook his head.

"Dey's tellin' one anudder whut is de bes' way ter git at an' take our skulps," he said soberly.

"I guess you are right about that, Pomp," agreed Dick.

"Say, massa, how did yo' know my name's Pomp?" the negro asked, rolling his eyes in amazement.

"Oh, I could tell that by looking at you," replied Dick, soberly, and the black man evidently believed this, for he looked at Dick askance, as if more than half afraid of him.

"What do you suppose will be the next move of the red skins?" asked the captain, somewhat anxiously.

"Hard telling," said Dick.

"I suppose they will try to get at us?"

"Oh, yes. I look for them to swim out to the island."

"Jove! in that case it will be all up with us."

"Yes. I rather think they are too many for us to hope to fight against them with success."

The two men dismounted now, and leading their horses up from the shore, and in among the trees, tied them. Then they looked to their weapons, and returned to where the negro stood on the sandy beach.

"Dey're comin', massa," said Pomp, his eyes beginning to roll in a way which showed that he was badly frightened.

"Yes, they are going to swim out and kill or capture us," said Dick, quietly.

"It looks that way, for a fact," agreed Captain McGraw.

"But we won't stay here and permit ourselves to be killed or captured," said Dick.

"What shall we do to prevent it?" the captain asked.

"Why, we will leave the island, and swim out into the river. It is possible that we may be able to swim across and make our escape."

"We nebber can do hit in de worl', massa," said Pomp.

"Why not?" Dick asked.

Before Pomp could reply there was a great commotion among the Indians who had started to swim out to the island; wild yells went up from them, and it was seen that they had turned and were going back toward the shore as fast as they could.

"What's the trouble, anyway?" asked Dick in surprise.

"Gators, massa!" cried Pomp.

"Gators?" inquiringly.

"Alligators," explained the captain.

"Yes, an' de 'gators hab done got one er two ob de Injuns," said Pomp. "Dat whut made de res' yell an' go back."

CHAPTER II.

THE MASKED DOZEN.

"Jove! I never thought of alligators," said Dick.

"Nor I," from the captain.

"Needer did I," from Pomp. "Uf I hed t'ought ob dem I dunno but I'd er stayed on de main lan' an' let de Injuns git me."

"It is strange that the alligators did not nab us," said Dick.

"Perhaps they did not know what to make of the horses' legs," said the captain.

"Likely that was it. Well, it is fortunate that they did not attack us."

"Yes."

"But how we goin' ter git back ter de mainlan', massa?" asked Pomp.

"The same way we came out to the island, Pomp."

"But de 'gators'll git us, sho'!"

"Oh, I don't think so. They didn't bother us, as we came out, and I don't think they will bother us as we go back."

The negro shook his head.

"I dunno 'bout dat, massa," he said. "Yo' see, de 'gators done had er taste ob blood, now, an' dey be moughty anxshus fur mo'."

The two white men looked grave.

"There may be something in that," said Dick soberly.

"You are right," agreed the captain.

"I guess we done hab ter settle down an' stay heah till somebuddy comes an' takes us off in er boat," said Pomp.

"Well, we will see how things work out," said Dick.

"We have no wish to go ashore while the Indians are there, anyway."

"No; that would be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire."

They stood there and watched the Indians for some time.

The redskins had reached the shore now, and were jabbering and gesticulating at a great rate. They were evidently greatly excited.

"I guess the alligators must have got one or two of them," said Dick.

"Yes, I think so," agreed the captain; "and I'm glad of it."

"Yes, it was a fortunate thing for us."

"Uf de 'gators hadn' got de Injuns de Injuns 'd er got us," said Pomp.

Presently the redskins entered the timber and disappeared from sight.

The three looked at one another questioningly.

"What do you think?" asked the captain. "Have they gone, or have they stopped just within the edge of the timber, with the intention of waiting for us to come ashore?"

"That is the question I was about to ask you," said Dick.

"I'll bet dat de Injuns air hid dere in de timber," said Pomp.

"I think it more than likely you are right," agreed Dick, while the officer nodded assent.

The three retired to the shade of the trees, and throwing themselves down on the sand, began discussing the situation.

They did not like the looks of things, and the discussion did not tend to make things look any more favorable for them.

"It is hard telling how this is going to end," said the captain, finally, a gloomy look on his face.

"You are right," agreed Dick. "The redskins will remain on watch all the rest of the day, and all night, in all likelihood, and if we try to escape, and manage to do so, the alligators and get to the shore, the Indians will gobble us up."

"Dat's jes' erbout whut'll happen, sho' ez yo' bo'n!" declared Pomp.

"Where do you live, Pomp?" asked Dick, presently.

"On Massa Renfrow's plantation."

"Where is the plantation?"

"Bout two miles frum heah."

"Is there any likelihood that they will miss you, and send out a party to look for you?"

The negro shook his head.

"I t'inks not, massa. Ole Massa Renfrow he t'ink v'uns kin take keer ob ou'sefs, an' he don't bother his head erbout us, nohow."

"Not much chance for aid to come from that direction, then."

"Not berry much chance, massa."

"Well, we are safe so long as we stay on the island, and we will stay here until some good chance presents itself, or until we are forced to leave by hunger."

The three were silent for awhile, and had their eyes bent on the shore, watching to see if they could detect any movement amidst the trees, to show that the Indians were still there, when suddenly they were startled by hearing a voice say:

"I am sorry to disturb you, gentlemen, but as I am on this island, and you are trespassers, I shall have to do so. Hands above your heads, please."

The three whirled, and looked in wondering amazement. Standing within twenty feet of them were twelve men, each and every one of whom had a pistol levelled. The strangers were roughly dressed, and well-armed, but

strange part of the affair was that they wore half-masks over the upper portion of their faces. Eleven wore black masks, the twelfth man wearing a yellow mask. This man was the one who had spoken, and he was evidently the leader of the band.

"Hello!" exclaimed Dick, coolly. "Who are you fellows?"

The captain said nothing, but stared in amazement.

"De Masked Duzzen!" cried Pomp, his face paling.

"The nigger has named us correctly," said he of the yellow mask. "We are indeed the Masked Dozen."

"And who are the Masked Dozen?" asked Dick.

"Oh, dey's bad men, massa," quavered Pomp. "Dey's robbers an'—an'——"

"Shut up, you black scoundrel!" roared the leader of the band. "What do you men by calling us robbers? I've a good mind to put a bullet through that woolly head of yours."

"Better shoot him in the body, captain," said one of the others grimly. "The bullet would probably be flattened against that hard skull of his, the same as against the hide of an alligator."

"Doan shoot, massa!" cried Pomp, dropping on his knees, and holding up his hands pleadingly. "Doan shoot me. I didn' mean nothin', 'deed I didn'!"

"All right; I won't shoot you just now. But you want to be very careful what you say in the future."

"I will, massa. I won't say nothin', 'deed I won't."

"What do you want of us?" asked Dick.

"I wan't first, to know who you are?"

"My name is Amos Harper."

"Where from?"

"Georgia."

"Where bound for?"

"My uncle's plantation."

"Where is it?"

"Over across the river."

"What's your uncle's name?"

"David Williams."

The man shook his head.

"Never heard of him," he said. "Have any of you men ever heard of a planter over across the river by the name of David Williams?" he asked, addressing his companions.

They shook their heads as one man.

He of the yellow mask glared at Dick suspiciously.

"I don't have much faith in the truth of your story, young man," he said.

"You don't?" calmly.

"No."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Yellowface."

A growl escaped the lips of the man.

"See here, you are too smart, altogether," he said in a threatening tone.

"Do you think so?" asked Dick, with a splendid assumption of innocent wonder.

"Yes; you are so smart that you are not likely to live long."

"I don't want to be so smart as that," said Dick, soberly.

"Well, if you wish to live you had better be careful how you address me."

"Well, if you will tell me your name I will address you by it," the youth said.

"It is none of your business what my name is. Just shut up and keep still."

"Oh, very well," replied the "Liberty Boy," calmly.

Pomp's eyes were rolling wildly, and it was evident that he was expecting every instant that Dick's brains would be blown out.

The leader of the band now turned his attention to the British officer.

"Your name, captain?" he said.

"Morris McGraw, sir," was the reply.

"Humph. Carter," to one of his men, "relieve the gentlemen of their weapons."

One of the men stepped forward and took the white men's weapons away from them. The negro had none.

"Now may we lower our hands?" asked Dick.

"You may do so, captain," said the man in the yellow mask. "But as for you, Mr. Smarty, you will keep your hands in the air till I tell you to take them down."

"Do you know what I think of you?" asked Dick, a dangerous gleam in his eyes as he looked the fellow straight in the face.

"No. What do you think of me?" in a threatening tone.

"I think that you are a coward and a scoundrel!"

"What's that!" roared the fellow. "Do you dare address such talk to me?—me, the captain of the Masked Dozen?"

"Yes, I dare address such talk to you, you coward! And I would dare talk to you the same way if you were the captain of the Masked Hundred, instead of only a dozen."

Up came the man's pistol until it covered Dick, and there was a fierce and angry light shining in the eyes behind the mask. To the fellow's surprise, however, the

threatened youth did not quail. Instead he looked the owner of the pistol straight in the eyes, while a smile of scorn appeared on his face.

"Shoot, you coward!" Dick cried. "Shoot, and prove that I have told the truth."

It was evident that it was only by a desperate effort of the will that the man prevented himself from pulling trigger. He was enraged by Dick's words, but realized that to shoot an unarmed man would be to prove that the youth had spoken the truth when he called him a coward, for that would certainly be the act of a coward.

Instead of lowering the pistol, the man simply let go of it and let it drop, at the same moment leaping forward and confronting Dick.

"Lower your hands and defend yourself," he hissed. "I am going to show you that I am not a coward."

The youth lowered his arms promptly, while a cool smile appeared on his face.

"What are you going to do?" he asked coolly.

"I am going to give you the worst thrashing you ever had in your life."

"That might not be a very bad one, for I was never thrashed in my life."

"Oh, you never were?"

"No."

"Well, you are going to get a thrashing now."

"And you are going to give it to me?"

"I am."

"All by yourself?"

"Yes."

"I think you will need some of your men to help you."

"Bah! Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"All right. Look out for yourself."

The man leaped toward Dick, and struck out fiercely, with his fist, but as might be expected where the opponent was one so active and skillful as Dick Slater, the blows did not land. Dick was out of the way, and almost before the man realized what had happened he received a terrible blow between the eyes, knocking him down, kerthump.

Exclamations of surprise and anger escaped the lips of the eleven men, and some of them made movements as if to take a hand in the affair, but their leader scrambled to his feet and waved them back.

"I will attend to his case," he said, his voice hoarse and rasping. "I will kill you for that, you young dog!"

"You will do nothing of the kind, you old hound," retorted Dick, and he protected himself from the fierce on-

slaught of the other without difficulty, until the man had tired himself out with his own exertions, and then the youth dealt the masked man a terrible blow on the jaw, stretching him on the sand senseless.

"Dat done beat ennything I ebber seed, 'deed hit do!" murmured Pomp, his eyes rolling.

The other masked men leaped forward, and while six or seven of them seized Dick and bound his arms together behind his back, the others went to work to bring their leader to.

It did not take long to do this, and presently he of the yellow mask was on his feet. He walked up and glared into Dick's face with eyes of fierce hatred.

"I'll have your heart's blood for this work of yours," he hissed.

CHAPTER III.

A SWIM FOR LIFE.

"You brought it on yourself," said Dick, quietly.

"That does not matter. No man ever yet struck me and lived long to boast of it."

"Phew! Is that so, really?"

The youth's tone was mocking, and it made the man more angry than ever.

"Yes, that's so, as you will soon find out."

"You are not going to kill me in cold blood?" asked Dick.

"I'm going to do worse than that."

"Worse?"

"Yes. I am going to devise some method of torture to go with your death—something that will make you suffer agonies of mind before the body torture begins."

"You are a cowardly brute and fiend!" said Dick, scathingly.

"That's all right. Call me names, if you like. I will have ample revenge on you for everything you say."

"I do not think it worth while wasting talk on you," retorted Dick. "Just go ahead and do your worst."

"That is what I am going to do. Now, let me see. What can we do to make you suffer torture of mind?"

The leader called two or three of his men to one side and held a conversation with them in low tones. Then he returned, and looking at Dick with eyes of triumphant hatred, said:

"I have decided on what shall be done with you."

"Have you?" was the reply in a calmly indifferent tone.

"I have."

"I'm glad of that."

"You won't be when you learn what we are going to do with you."

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, we can tell better after I know what you intend doing with me."

"You wish to know?"

"If you wish to tell."

"Very well. We are going to make you run a gauntlet."

"A gauntlet, eh?"

"Yes."

"Somewhat after the fashion set by the Indians, I suppose? You and your men will stand in a double row, and I will have to run between the rows, and as I go you will thump me over the head with clubs, stick knives into me, and such things as that?"

The man of the yellow mask shook his head.

"No, that isn't it."

"No?" in surprise.

"No. That isn't the kind of gauntlet we are going to make you run."

"What kind of a gauntlet is it, then?"

"The gauntlet of the alligators."

Dick started, and in spite of his being possessed of nerves of steel, he paled slightly.

An exclamation of horror escaped the lips of Captain McGraw.

"I beg of you not to do that, sir," he said. "That is too horrible."

"Hit's all up wid young massa," thought Pomp, his eyes rolling wildly.

"Ha! that makes you wince!" cried the captain of the Masked Dozen in triumph. "I thought it would."

"Well, it is enough to make a man wince, isn't it, to think of being made to undergo such an ordeal as you have spoken of?"

"Oh, yes; but you are so brave that I thought perhaps you would not flinch."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Well, we will not fool away any more time. Having decided what to do with you we will get to work and do it. I will say, my bold young friend, that if you succeed in swimming ashore, and elude the Indians who will

be waiting there to capture and scalp you, then you may go your way in peace."

"Thank you," said Dick, sarcastically.

"Oh, you are welcome."

"And let me tell you something, you scoundrel with the yellow mask," said Dick fiercely, "if it should happen that I escape death from the jaws of the alligators and capture at the hands of the Indians, then I shall make it my especial business to hunt you down and make an end of you. Do you hear?"

"Oh, yes," mockingly; "I hear."

"Well, you will do well to remember what I have said, for there is a chance that I may escape, and I will tell you that no alligator will be more merciless to me than I will be to you."

"Ha, ha, ha! Threatened men live long. And you may be sure that if I had the least idea that you could swim to the shore in safety I would not let you make the attempt. No, I would shoot you dead, here and now, and make sure of it. But I am confident that no man can possibly swim to the shore without being seized by the alligators, the water being full of them, and we shall stand here and watch you make futile attempts to evade the teeth of the monsters."

"You are a monster yourself," said Dick, "and I think that I shall live to put you out of the way—to rid the earth of such a demon."

"I have no fears of any such thing. If I am not killed till you do it, then I will die a natural death."

"We will see."

"So we will. In less than half an hour you will be food for alligators that are even now swimming about in the vicinity of the spot where the Indians were seized a short time ago. Having had a taste of human blood, they will be eager for more."

"Again I intercede in behalf of this young man," said Captain McGraw. "If you must take his life, do it with pistol or knife. Don't put him to death in such a horrible manner."

"This is not your affair, Captain McGraw," said the leader of the Masked Dozen coldly. "Oblige me by keeping still."

"I am much obliged to you, captain," said Dick. "I shall not forget your kindness, and if the occasion ever comes, I shall show you that I appreciate your words in my behalf. It is useless to talk to this fiend, however. It is a waste of breath."

"You are right about that," with a harsh laugh. "It is

a waste of breath to talk to me. I have decided, and that settles it."

At the command from their leader, the men freed Dick's arms, and led him down to the water's edge. There they released him, and drawing their pistols, covered him with them.

"Now start at once," said the leader of the gang. "You must either make the attempt to swim the gauntlet of the alligators, or die here and now. I prefer that you should do the former, but you can of course take your choice."

The "Liberty Boy" stood at the water's edge and gazed away, across the water to the shore, nearly half a mile distant. He realized that it was taking a terrible risk to attempt to swim to the shore, but to refuse to make the attempt was to insure his death by the bullets from the pistols, so the youth had no thought of refusing to swim the gauntlet. It afforded him a chance—a very, very slim one, of course, but still a chance—to escape death, and he was the youth to accept even a slim chance, when nothing better offered.

"Well, have you decided?" asked the man, harshly.

"Oh, yes," replied Dick. "I am going to attempt to swim the gauntlet, and somehow I believe that I shall be successful in getting to the shore."

"Bah! It is an impossibility. And even if you should do so, the Indians will capture you and burn you at the stake. It will be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire."

"I may get ashore and escape from the Indians," said Dick, quietly. "And if I do," in a stern, fierce tone, "then you will need to look out for yourself. I am a man who always pays his debts, and I shall not rest until I have paid you the one I will owe you."

"Bah, you will not escape. If I even so much as thought that you had a faint chance of doing so, I would not let you go, but would shoot you dead where you stand. I know you cannot escape death from the alligators or Indians, but even if you should do so I have no fear of you. I have heard men utter boasts before to-day."

"What I have said is not a boast," said Dick, "but a simple statement of fact. If I escape, you will hear from me, and you will rue the day that you selected me for a subject on which to wreak your spite."

"Enough talk," cried the man with the yellow mask sternly. "Start before I count ten or die where you stand."

"This is terrible," said Captain McGraw to the negro, in an undertone. "It is too bad, too bad."

"I done guess hit's all up wid Massa Harper," murmured Pomp in reply.

"One, two, three, four——"

The youth who was to take such a terrible risk did not wait for the finish of the count, but entered the water, and began wading out at once.

Slowly he waded out, getting deeper and deeper, and he was watched eagerly by Captain McGraw and Pomp and the members of the Masked Dozen band.

Presently Dick was out as far as he could wade. The water was up to his neck; the next step might plunge him in over his head, and so he let his feet come up off the bottom of the river and began swimming.

"Good-bye—a long, long good-bye!" called out the leader of the Masked Dozen, in a heartless tone.

"We will meet again," replied Dick.

"Ha, ha, ha. I have no expectation of ever meeting you again, my bold friend. I have no fears that such a thing will happen."

The youth made no reply, but put his whole mind on the work before him. He realized that he would have need for all his coolness and presence of mind. And for that matter, he was never cooler or calmer than at the present moment. His brain was clear, and every nerve was strung to the highest pitch. His every sense was on the alert, and ready to warn him of danger.

As he swam through the water, slowly, carefully, and steadily, Dick was watching all around him like a hawk, and at the same time his mind was at work. He told himself that it would be suicide to swim straight to the shore, as in doing so he would have to pass through the water at the point where the Indians had been seized by the alligators. He reasoned that the alligators would remain near this spot, attracted by the scent of the blood of the ill-fated redskins, and he further reasoned that on this account there would be less likelihood that the saurians would be numerous at other points in the vicinity.

"I think that nearly all of the alligators in the waters hereabouts will be gathered there," Dick told himself, "and by making a circuit, and going around that spot, I may succeed in avoiding them."

So as soon as he was a hundred yards or so from the shore, Dick changed his course, and swam away diagonally, going toward the shore at a point half a mile or more down the river.

The members of the Masked Dozen noted this move at once, and uttered exclamations.

"That fellow is no fool," said one.

"No. He is going to try to swim around the spot where the Indians were pulled under. He figures it that there is where the alligators will be thickest."

"And he is right about that, too."

"Yes," agreed the leader. "But there are plenty of alligators everywhere around. He will never reach the shore alive."

"I don't think so, either," one replied, "but he is proving himself to be a pretty shrewd fellow."

Another thing Dick did that would have made them think he was a "pretty shrewd fellow," had they known it, and that was to swim very cautiously, and as nearly noiselessly as possible. He hoped by so doing to keep from attracting the attention of the alligators, as, if they heard him splashing the water they would come in a hurry, attracted by the noise.

Weighed down with his clothing as he was, it was hard work swimming, but Dick was strong, and was an expert swimmer, so he had no doubt regarding his ability to reach the shore if he escaped the jaws of the alligators.

Onward he made his way through the water, swimming at moderate speed, and making scarcely any noise. The water was quite clear, and the youth kept a sharp lookout all around, and below him.

He was on a terrible strain, for he did not know at what moment one of the monsters, or a dozen of them, might put in an appearance. He realized, too, that if they did come it would be impossible for him to escape. They were more at home in the water than he was, and were quicker, and would be able to grab him in spite of all he could do.

He continued onward, however, and every nerve was strung to the highest tension, and with each passing moment the youth expected to see some of the monsters put in an appearance.

Onward he moved, through the water, and he was half-way to the shore and still there were no signs of the alligators.

The members of the Masked Dozen band were watching eagerly, and a frown was beginning to appear on the leader's face.

"Can it be possible that the fellow is going to succeed in reaching the shore, after all?" he exclaimed. "Surely not."

"I don't think so, captain," replied one. "And if he should do so the Indians will capture him."

"That's so. I forgot about the Indians. He cannot escape."

"He won't escape the alligators, I'm thinking," said one.

"I won't believe it till I see him step out on the shore, at any rate."

Dick made his way through the water at a fair rate of speed, and gradually drew nearer and nearer the shore. He

began to think that he was to escape being seen by the alligators, after all.

"Jove! I hope so," he said to himself. "I would hate to have my life come to an end in such a manner. I would rather meet death at the hands of the Indians than that the alligators should get me."

He was now within less than a hundred yards of the shore, and was beginning to feel confident that he was to make his escape, but just then he saw one—two dark forms swimming toward him.

The alligators were coming.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE.

A sudden feeling of horror came over the youth, but he shook it off, and made up his mind to make a brave fight for his life.

"It is not far to the shore; perhaps I may be able to reach there in safety after all," he thought, and then, as the alligators were almost in reaching distance of him, he suddenly began kicking and splashing the water at a great rate, with the purpose of frightening them away.

In this he was successful in a measure. The alligators were frightened to the extent that they paused and retired a short distance, but they were only biding their time and awaiting the opportunity to advance with a rush.

The youth was well aware of the fact that his only chance for life lay in keeping up the kicking and splashing, however, and he did not cease the work for an instant, and as he kicked and splashed around he kept swimming as best he could toward the shore.

The members of the Masked Dozen band saw Dick's manœuvres, and knew what it meant, as did also the British captain and Pomp.

"The alligators are after him," cried the man with the yellow mask.

"Yes, they'll get him, you may be sure," from one of the men.

"I'm afraid he is right," said Captain McGraw to himself.

"Hit's all up wid young massa, now!" muttered Pomp, watching the distant scene with wildly rolling eyes.

But it wasn't "all up wid young massa" by any means. Dick kept up the work of kicking and splashing around,

and thus held the alligators at bay, and all the time he was gradually working his way in toward the shore.

The noise the youth made had the effect of attracting other alligators to the spot, however, and soon he was surrounded by at least a score of the monsters, all waiting for a cessation of the noise and splashing, when they would dart in and seize the swimmer.

Slowly but surely Dick worked his way toward the shore, and he kept up such a noise and disturbance in the water that the alligators were afraid to try to seize him. At last he was where he could touch bottom, and he did so and began walking toward the shore, and now he was enabled to make more noise and disturbance in the water than before, and the alligators, much as they wanted to get at him, feared to do so. The result was that he reached the shore in safety, and stepped out on dry land unharmed. And even as he did so a score of ugly snouts came sliding up out of the water, and the heads of the alligators appeared to view.

The youth did not fear the monsters, now, however, and he turned his thoughts upon the Indians. Were they in hiding near at hand, he wondered. If so, why had they not appeared? Surely they would have seen him ere this, he thought; and he began to have hopes that the redskins had taken their departure.

Feeling that he would be safer there he entered the timber, and hastened away through it, keeping a sharp lookout in all directions, in order to avoid being surprised.

As he progressed deeper and deeper into the timber, without seeing anything of the redskins, however, he began to feel safer.

"Perhaps I may make my escape, after all," he said to himself. "Jove, I have been fortunate, as it is, in escaping from the alligators. Now, if I succeed in getting away from the Indians I shall have cause to congratulate myself on my good fortune."

Onward Dick moved, keeping on the alert constantly. He scarcely thought of his wet clothing. The weather was warm, and he was not uncomfortable, save for the unpleasant sensation made by the clothing clinging close to his form and limbs.

And even as he hastened onward, even as he watched for Indians and momentarily expected that they would appear, he was thinking of how he had cheated the leader of the Masked Dozen out of his revenge.

"That fellow is a great scoundrel," said the youth to himself, "and I shall try to attend to his case before I leave this part of the country. My 'Liberty Boys' will be down here in a day or two, and then, after I have visited St. Au-

gustine and attended to the work of spying on the British, I will hunt the Masked Dozen down, and break up the band."

Onward Dick ran, and presently he emerged from the timber, and found himself almost at the very doors of a goodly-sized house. It was almost a mansion, compared to what the majority of the houses in that part of the country were, and the youth was somewhat surprised.

"I wonder if this can be the plantation of Colonel Renfrow, Pomp's master?" the youth asked himself. "I will soon know."

He made his way to the house, and as he stepped up on the piazza a grim-faced man of perhaps fifty years stepped out and confronted him. The man had keen gray eyes and gray hair, mustache and imperial, and he eyed the youth critically and searchingly.

"Well, young man, have you been taking a bath in the river with your clothes on?" he asked, in a brisk, rather whimsical manner.

"Well, yes, that is about it," replied Dick, doffing his hat and bowing. "I have been taking a swim in the river, but I assure you it was not done voluntarily."

A look of interest appeared in the man's eyes.

"How was that?" he asked.

"It was this way, sir. I and a friend were riding along the road a couple of miles down the river, and suddenly we were startled by the approach of a negro, who came dashing out from among the trees shouting that the Indians were coming."

"Must have been one of my niggers," said the man, "but go on."

"He was right; the Indians were coming, and I took the negro up behind me, and we urged our horses to a gallop, in the hope that we would be able to escape. But a lot of redskins appeared in the road ahead of us, and we speedily found ourselves surrounded on all sides save that on which lay the river. There was an island a half-mile out in the stream, and so we rode into the river and swam the horse to the island, thus escaping from the Indians."

"Ha! that was taking big chances. The river is full of alligators."

"We had proof of that when the Indians started to swim out to the island. One or two of them were pulled under by the alligators, and the rest hastened to get back to the mainland."

"I should judge that they would have done so. I am surprised that they made the attempt to swim out to the island in the first place."

"It does seem surprising, for they must have known of the presence of the alligators."

"Certainly. They knew it well."

"It may be that they thought their numbers would frighten the alligators away."

"Likely; but they found their mistake."

"Yes, but we reached the island in safety."

"The alligators were doubtless afraid to attack the horses."

"I suppose so. Well, we reached the island in safety, and saw the failure of the Indians to follow us, and were congratulating ourselves on being safe, when we were suddenly confronted by a dozen men with masks on their faces."

"Ha!" exclaimed the man. "Did one of the number wear a yellow mask?"

"Yes. The others were all black."

"Just so. That is a band that is known in these parts as the 'Masked Dozen.'"

"So Pomp said, and so they themselves acknowledged."

"Pomp, eh? Was that the name given by the nigger you picked up?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought as much. He's one of my slaves."

"Then you must be Colonel Renfrow," said Dick.

"At your service, sir; and what, if I may ask, is your name?"

"Amos Harper, sir."

"Well, Mr. Harper, go on with your story. How comes it you are here, and alone? Where is your friend, and Pomp?"

"They are still on the island, sir, I suppose."

"Still on the island?"

"Yes, and prisoners in the hands of the Masked Dozen."

"Well, well! I don't understand the matter. How did you manage to make your escape?"

"I succeeded in escaping as a result of the desire of the leader of the band to secure revenge on me for knocking him senseless."

"Ha! Go on."

"They forced me to enter the water and swim ashore."

"Ah!"

"They thought I would be torn to pieces by the alligators before getting half way there."

"Exactly; and how happens it that you were not?"

"Partly good luck, I judge. I swam as noiselessly as possible, and did not attract the attention of any of the monsters till I was within a hundred yards of the shore,

and then I made so much fuss and disturbance in the water that they were afraid to attack me."

"And you reached the shore in safety?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well. I would not have believed it possible that any man could swim from the island to the shore without being pulled under by the alligators."

"I managed to do it, sir."

"But the Indians who drove you over to the island in the first place? Were they not on hand to capture you?"

"No, sir; at any rate I saw nothing of them."

"That is strange."

"So it seems to me; I expected nothing else than I would be seized the instant I reached the shore."

"Perhaps they thought that one who could swim from the island to the shore without being pulled under by the alligators was a proper person to let alone. They are very superstitious, you know."

"Yes, I know that. Well, whatever may have been their reason, it acted for my benefit."

"Well, I welcome you to my home, Mr. Harper, and am glad to extend to you open-handed Southern hospitality."

"Thank you, Colonel Renfrow."

"No thanks are necessary. It is a pleasure to me. And now, if you will come, I will show you to a room and bring you some dry clothing. I have a boy about your age and size, and you shall have a suit of his. I think it will just about fit you."

"Thanks, Colonel Renfrow."

"My boy, Tom, is away at present," explained the colonel, "but he will be home in a day or two."

The youth fancied there was a sad cadence to the man's voice as he spoke of his son, and wondered why this was.

The host conducted him to a room upstairs. It looked out toward the river, and was a very pleasant room.

"I will be back in a few moments, Mr. Harper. Be seated," and the colonel was gone.

The youth did not sit down, however, as he did not wish to spoil the nicely upholstered chairs or sofa with the wet clothing.

The colonel returned in a few minutes, with a suit of clothing, which he lay across a chair with the remark:

"I think those will fit you very well. You will feel better in dry clothing, at any rate, even if the fit isn't just what it might be."

"Yes, indeed."

Left to himself, Dick hastened to doff the wet clothing and don the dry, and as the colonel had said, he felt much better.

"There, I feel almost as good as new again," the youth said to himself.

There was a knock at the door, and Dick opened it, to find a grinning negro standing there.

"Massa Kunnel sent me up ter git yo' wet cloes an' take dem down an' hang dem out on de line, sah," he explained.

"All right. That is just what I wish done. They will soon dry then."

The youth handed the clothing to the negro, who took them and hastened away.

Then Dick went downstairs, and found the colonel on the piazza, in company with an elderly lady and a beautiful girl of perhaps seventeen years.

"My wife and daughter Margaret, Mr. Harper," said the colonel with a bow, and Dick acknowledged the introduction gracefully and pleasantly, remarking to himself that Margaret was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

"I have been telling them about your adventures, Mr. Harper," the colonel explained. "They think it almost a miracle your swimming across from the island to the mainland in safety."

"It was little short of a miracle, Mr. Harper," said the elderly lady.

"The chances are that you would never succeed in doing it again," said Margaret.

"I was surprised, myself, when I succeeded in getting ashore in safety," said Dick. "I consider that I am very fortunate in being alive at this moment."

"Yes, indeed," from the colonel.

"And I am also fortunate in having fallen upon such good quarters, after my unpleasant adventures," smiled Dick.

"Well, you are welcome," Mr. Harper, his host declared. "You must consider yourself at home here."

"Thank you."

"Yonder comes a horseman," said Mrs. Renfrow at this moment.

A horseman was indeed coming up the road at a gallop, and when he was within a quarter of a mile of the house, Margaret exclaimed:

"It is brother Tom."

"Yes, it is your brother," said the colonel, and Dick, who was keen-eyed and shrewd, saw that the colonel's lips were compressed, and there was a somewhat hard look on his face.

The horseman rode up in front of the piazza, and leaping off his horse, called out in a loud, angry voice: "Pete! —Jim!—Pomp!—where are you all? Come a-running,

now, and take my horse to the stable and look after him. Hurry, you rascals!"

A negro came running around the corner of the house, and took the bridle-reins, and led the horse away, and Dick saw that the colored man was afraid of the newcomer.

The youth had been sizing the horseman up, and his estimate of him was that he was a reckless, dissolute young man. "I think he has given his parents considerable trouble," was Dick's decision. "That's too bad, too, for the colonel and his wife—and their daughter as well—are nice people. He isn't bad-looking, but shows the signs of dissipation."

The young man—he was not much older than Dick—came running up the steps, and nodded toward his folks, with the words, "Hello, father and mother and Sister Marg. How are you all?"

As the tones of the young man's voice fell upon Dick's ears plainly he gave a start, and looked searchingly at the newcomer.

"I have heard that voice before," the youth said to himself, "but where?"

CHAPTER V.

ATTACKED.

"This is Mr. Harper, Tom," said the colonel, indicating Dick. "Mr. Harper, my son Tom."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Harper," said the young man shaking hands, while he looked into Dick's eyes with a peculiar, quizzical smile, the meaning of which the youth could not fathom.

"And I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Renfrow," replied Dick.

"That's more than everybody in this part of the country would say," with a laugh that grated harshly on the ears of the hearers. "By the way, Mr. Harper, you are wearing a suit of clothes that is exactly like one of mine."

There was that peculiar, quizzical look in the young man's eyes again.

"They are yours, Mr. Renfrow," with a smile. "Mine were soaked, and your father lent me your suit while mine is drying."

"Ah, I see. But how came you soaked? Did you go in swimming with your clothes on?"

"Pretty nearly that," was the quiet reply.

Then the colonel hastened to tell the young man the story of Dick's adventures, just as Dick had told them to him. The young man listened, and all the time there was that peculiar, quizzical look in his eyes. When his father had finished, however, he gave utterance to his surprise that Dick had succeeded in swimming from the island to the shore in safety.

"I would not make the attempt to do that for a fortune," he declared.

"Nor would I," said Dick, "but when there is no alternative, when it is that or have your brains blown out, one is apt to accept the issue and make the attempt."

"Yes, I suppose I should have done the same as you did, had I been in your place," agreed Tom Renfrow.

The more Dick heard the young man talk the more confident he was that he had heard the voice before, but he could not think where it was that he had heard it.

It was drawing near evening, now, and presently supper was announced. Tom Renfrow excused himself and hastened to his room, and made his toilet, and was down in the dining-room almost as soon as the rest.

The meal was a good one, and as Dick was hungry, he enjoyed it very much, and ate heartily.

When the meal was ended they returned to the piazza, as was cooler and more pleasant there than in the house.

"Are you not afraid of being attacked by the Indians?" asked Dick.

"Yes, we have fears of an attack," replied the colonel, "and I have some of the slaves constantly on guard, doing sentinel duty, but so far we have escaped."

They talked on about various things, until darkness had settled over all. They were still sitting on the piazza, talking, when they heard a great outcry from the quarters occupied by the slaves, and a few moments later the slaves were running to the house.

"Injuns! Injuns!" was the cry. "De Injuns am coming, Massa Kunnel."

Of course it was impossible to say whether or not this was the truth, but the colonel thought it wise to act as if it were known to be the truth, so all entered the house, and as soon as all the slaves had entered the doors were closed and barred.

"Have you weapons, Mr. Harper?" asked Tom Renfrow.

"No," the youth replied. "The Masked Dozen took my weapons away from me."

"Come to my room. I have plenty of weapons and ammunition. You shall have all in that line that you think you can handle to advantage."

"Thank you. I shall feel much better to have some weapons in my possession once more."

They hastened upstairs to Tom's room, and Dick was given a belt, in which he stuck four pistols and a knife. Then he took what ammunition he thought he would need, and the two left the room and made their way up to the attic, and from this they crawled through an opening and out upon an observation platform at the extreme top of the house. There was a railing about two feet high around this platform, so there was no danger of falling off.

"Now, let's see if we can get sight of the redskins," said Tom.

They peered down toward the ground, but could see nothing that looked like Indians. It was quite dark, however, and it would have been hard to see the Indians even if they were there.

"See anything?" asked Tom.

"No, do you?"

"No; it's too dark. The moon will be up soon, however, and then we will be able to see the redskins if they are in the vicinity."

"I should think that if the Indians are here we would hear them," said Dick.

"They may be slipping around, spying," was the reply.

The two listened and watched, and pretty soon they saw the rim of the moon rising above the eastern horizon.

"Good!" exclaimed Tom. "Now we will be able to see what is going on."

Soon the moon was up, and the country was bathed in a flood of mellow light.

"Now look closely," said Tom. "Let's see who has the keenest eyesight."

"All right," replied Dick.

Presently an exclamation escaped his lips.

"What is it?" queried Tom.

"I see them!"

"Where?"

"Yonder, at the negroes' cabins. They are going through the cabins and taking everything that pleases them."

"Jove, you are right. I see them, now!"

"When they get through with the negroes' cabins they will probably turn their attention to the house."

"I fear so."

There was a sober sound to the young man's voice.

"Well, we will give them a good fight," said Dick, reassuringly, "doubtless we will be able to drive them off."

"I don't know about that," in a dubious voice, "they seem to be here in force, and we have not many fighters to oppose them with."

"There are quite a number of negroes downstairs."

"But they can't be depended on to fight."

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it."

"But surely they will fight to save their own lives."

"I don't know about it."

"Why, even a rat will fight for its life. I think the negro men will fight if they are given to understand that by so doing they may save their lives, which otherwise they will lose."

"Maybe so; you can try the experiment of getting them to fight if you like."

"Perhaps you had better try it. They know you, and they don't know me."

"That's it, exactly; they know me too well, and they won't do anything for me if they can help it. You go along and get them to agree to fight if you can. I'll stay here and keep watch of the Indians."

"Very well," said Dick, and he made his way back downstairs, thinking as he went that Tom Renfrow was a peculiar fellow. "I don't understand him," he said to himself. "He must be a sort of 'black sheep,' for I am confident that he is not in the good graces of his father, for some reason."

The youth found the slaves huddled in the halls and rooms like sheep, and they were badly frightened, indeed. It was evident that they were expecting death to overtake them at any moment, and many of them were trembling as if with the ague, and their eyes were rolling wildly.

"Have you been able to make any discoveries?" asked the colonel, drawing Dick to one side.

"Yes," replied the youth; "the Indians are at hand. They are now engaged in rifling the negroes' cabins of their contents, and after they are through there they will turn their attention to the house, I fear."

"I fear so. Does there seem to be a very large force?"

"Yes. I should judge that there must be at least fifty of the scoundrels."

"Fifty against three. That is big odds."

"Yes, but we have the advantage of being in the house, where they cannot get at us; and besides, I see here at least fifty big, able-bodied negro men. That makes us the equal of the redskins in numbers."

"But the niggers won't fight."

"They won't fight."

"They must fight."

The colonel shook his head.

"They won't do it. They are too big cowards."

"But when they find that their lives depend on it they will fight."

Again a shake of the head.

"I doubt it. But you may try to get them to fight if you like. I know that I could not accomplish it."

"Very well. I will make the attempt."

The youth lost no time, but approached the negroes, and one at a time called the men out and got them together in the farther end of the great hall.

"Now, then," he said, addressing the negroes, "all who wish to die and have their scalps taken by the Indians hold up their hands."

The negroes rolled their eyes wildly, and looked at one another in questioning wonder, but none of them held up their hands.

"So none of you wish to die and be scalped, eh?" Dick remarked with a smile.

"Dat's whut we don' wan' ter do, massa," said one of the negroes.

"So I supposed. Well, now another question: If you could prevent yourselves from dying and being scalped would you do it?"

There was a few moments of silence, and then the same fellow said:

"I done reckons we would, massa."

"Exactly, and now, that is just what will have to be done."

"How am dat, massa?"

"I will tell you. If you stand here, shivering with fear, the Indians will break into the house and kill and scalp every one of you; but if you will take weapons in your hands and fight, you will be able to drive the Indians away and will save your lives and scalps."

The negroes looked at one another dubiously and questioningly, and felt of their hair gingerly. It seemed as if the thought of being scalped gave them more terror than that of being killed.

"Does yo' really t'ink we could fight dem Injuns erway, massa?" asked one of the black men dubiously.

"Of course. I know you can do it if you will try. They are no more than you in numbers, and you have the advantage of the protection afforded by the walls of the house. If you will take weapons in your hands, and do as I tell you we shall be able to drive the Indians away."

"Uf we reelly thought we could do dat, massa, we'd be willin' ter do whut yo' say," said the man who had done most of the talking.

"I know you can do it. All you have to do is try."

There was a short period of silence, and then the negro

said: "Wal, I foah wun am willin' ter take weepins in han' an' fight de Injuns. I mought stan' et ter be killed, but I kinder objec' ter bein' skulped," and he rubbed his hand over his wool and shuddered and rolled his eyes.

This speech seemed to decide the others, and they all said they would fight.

This was what Dick wanted, and he at once led the way to Tom Renfrow's room, where, strange to say, was a great lot of weapons of all kinds, and plenty of ammunition.

There were muskets, swords, pistols, and knives galore, and the negroes were speedily fitted out, and then Dick distributed them through the upstairs rooms, with instructions to open the windows and keep watch, and if they saw any Indians coming toward the house to fire upon them.

The negroes said they would, and it was not long before the crack! crack! of muskets and pistols was heard, and occasionally the wild yell of a redskin proved that a bullet had taken effect.

Having got the negroes stationed, Dick told Colonel Renfrow to look after them and keep them at work at the windows, and then he again rejoined Tom on the top of the house.

"Well, you did manage to get some of the negroes to agree to fight, eh?" the young man remarked as Dick appeared.

"Yes; they seemed to be willing to fight to save their scalps if not their lives," was the reply.

"That is just like them. They hate the idea of having their wool yanked off."

Then the two watched the scene below with considerable interest. Several times the Indians made a rush toward the house, but each time the negroes poured bullets in among them, and the redskins turned and fled. Dick and Tom joined in the firing, and their shots did more damage than the majority of those fired by the negroes, for they took good aim and were good shots.

The Indians whooped and yelled, and it was evident that they were greatly enraged. They had not expected to meet with resistance, and now they were worked up to such a pitch that they were ready to do anything.

"I fear they may set the house on fire," said Dick.

"That is what I am afraid of, too," said Tom.

A few minutes later the youths' fears were realized, for a negro came running up and told them that the house was on fire. He was wildly excited, almost beside himself with terror, in fact, and when the youths hastened down to where the rest were they found the men huddled together in the hall like sheep, their weapons forgotten.

"Here, this won't do," cried Dick. "Take your weapons

and get back to the windows and shoot any of the Indians that you lay eyes on. Tom and I will put the fire out."

The youth spoke so confidently of putting the fire out that the negroes were encouraged, and went back to their stations at the windows.

"How are we going to go about putting the fire out?" asked Tom, as they went downstairs.

"I don't know," replied Dick. "I fear we cannot do it, but we must make the attempt."

They did not have to do so, however, for just as they reached the lower floor they heard the sound of the galloping of horses and loud cheering, followed by the rattle of musketry. Dick thought he recognized the voices of the newcomers. The cheering sounded familiar.

"By all that is wonderful, I believe it is my band of 'Liberty Boys,'" he said to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

A CONFESSION.

"Come on," he cried to Tom, "those are friends, and while they are driving the Indians away we will put out the fire."

"How do you know they are friends?" asked Tom.

"Why, the fact that they have attacked the Indians is proof of that. Come."

They hastened out of doors, and with a glance saw that the Indians were fleeing to the timber, pursued by a large party of horsemen. Then they hastened to the point where the fire had been set, and quickly kicked the burning sticks and scattered them right and left, after which a bucketful of water was sufficient to put out the fire, it having scarcely more than got started.

The party of horsemen was now coming back toward the house, the Indians having escaped into the timber, where it would be useless to follow them, and as the party came nearer Dick saw that it was really his company of "Liberty Boys." Two days before he had left them in Savannah, Georgia, and he had until within the past five minutes supposed them to be there still.

"I don't understand why they have followed me," he said to himself, "but I am glad they did, for they got here only just in time."

When the leader of the party was almost up to the spot where Dick and Tom stood, the youth stepped forward, and addressing the horseman, said:

"Well, sir, you and your men got here just in time, and we thank you. But for your timely arrival the house would have been burned to the ground, and doubtless we should all have been murdered."

Bob Estabrook was the leader of the party, and he was Dick's righthand man, and as shrewd a fellow as ever lived. He understood at once from Dick's words and manner that he did not wish it known that he knew them, or was connected with them in any way, and he replied, in much the same manner as that assumed by Dick.

"No thanks are necessary, sir," said Bob. "We are glad to have been able to render assistance where it was needed. Are you the gentleman of this plantation, sir?"

"No, I am but a visitor here. This young man is the son of the owner of the plantation, however. Tom, you had better call your father, in order that he may thank these gentlemen for what they have done."

"Ah, yes; I'll do so, Mr.—Harper," said Tom, and he hastened into the house.

This was what Dick desired, as he wished a chance to exchange a few words with the youths privately, and he did so, quickly explaining the situation to the "Liberty Boys," who promised to act toward him as if he were a stranger.

Tom quickly returned with his father, and the colonel thanked the "Liberty Boys" heartily for what they had done.

"Have you gentlemen had supper?" he asked in conclusion.

Bob said that they had not.

"We were looking for a good place to go into camp when we came upon the scene of the attack on your house, and took a hand in it," he explained.

"Then dismount, and enter," was the hearty invitation. "I will order that food be provided for you at once, and the niggers will look after your horses. Ho, Pete, Sam, Dick, Bill, Joe—all of you. Come out here at once."

The negroes came forth, looking frightened, and it was evident that they had not recovered from the fright which the coming of the Indians had caused them.

"There's no danger now," said the colonel. "You see there is a sufficient number of these gentlemen to thrash all the Indians in Florida. Take their horses, and feed and rub them down. Hurry, now."

The negroes obeyed, and led the horses to the stables, which were perhaps two hundred yards distant to the rear, and not far from the cluster of cabins occupied by the slaves.

Then the entire party entered the house, and Mrs. Ren-

frow, being told what was required, hastened to the kitchen and put the servants to work preparing a meal for the hungry youths who had happened in at such an opportune time.

An hour later the meal was ready, and the "Liberty Boys" entered the large dining-hall and ate heartily.

When the meal was ended, they went out upon the piazza and a general conversation was carried on for an hour, when the colonel told the youths that they were welcome to the use of as many of the rooms in the house as they cared to occupy.

"There is no need of that," said Bob. "This piazza will hold us all easily enough, and we will roll up in our blankets and sleep here. It will be more comfort than we are accustomed to."

The colonel did not urge them to come in the house, as he was an old soldier, and knew they would be almost as comfortable on the piazza as in the house. So he and the other members of his family bade the youths good-night and entered the house.

They had insisted that Dick sleep in the house, but he said he would sleep on the piazza with the young strangers, and when the colonel saw he really wished to do so he said no more.

Tom Renfrow, who was pretty shrewd, took note of this, and said to himself: "I'll wager anything that that young fellow knows who those other fellows are. Somehow I thought from the very first that they were not strangers to one another. I wonder who they are, and I wonder who he is? I don't believe his name is Harper any more than mine is."

And if Tom was puzzled regarding Dick and the "Liberty Boys" and suspicious of them, so was Dick puzzled about Tom. The more he heard the young man's voice, the more certain he became that he had heard it somewhere.

Of course, Dick's real reason for wishing to sleep on the piazza was so that he might get a chance to talk with Bob and the rest of the youths. He wished to learn why they had come down into Florida.

The youth was cautious, however; he did not engage Bob in conversation until after more than an hour had passed. Then, believing that there was no chance of their being overheard, he opened up a conversation with Bob, who explained that he and his comrades had been sent down into Florida, from Savannah, by General Robert Howe, who wished them to be on the lookout for marauding parties of redcoats, who had been in the habit of coming across the St. Johns River and robbing and pillaging the rice

plantations, and even going so far as to steal the slaves and take them back across the river and sell them.

"Then, too, the general said it might be possible that you would get into trouble," went on Bob. "And if we were down here we would be able to help you out."

"And you found me in trouble when you got here, sure enough, Bob."

"Yes, I guess the Indians would have wiped everybody out if we hadn't come just when we did."

"They certainly would, for the negroes would not have put up much of a fight when it came to a hand-to-hand affair."

"I suppose not."

"No, they are arrant cowards, and I had hard work getting them to do anything."

"Well, I don't understand how it is that this and other plantation houses haven't been burned, and their owners and their families murdered long ago."

"I guess that not nearly all the Indians are on the war-path, Bob. I think it is only a comparatively few of the younger braves who have taken advantage of the fact that war is raging to plunder and burn and murder the white people."

"I judge you are right about that."

There was silence of a few moments, and then Dick said: "I wish I knew whether or not the owner of this plantation is a patriot."

"Why?" asked Bob.

"Why, if he was a patriot I would have you boys stay here and make this your headquarters while we are down in these parts."

"Well, you can find out, can't you?"

"I suppose so. I'll see if I can find out in the morning."

There was not much more conversation, as it was late and the youths sleepy, and a few minutes later they were sound asleep.

There had been an auditor to the conversation.

Tom Renfrow, being suspicious that Dick and the stranger youths were comrades, had slipped downstairs, and to an open window overlooking the piazza, and just back of where Dick and Bob lay. They had talked in low tones, but his hearing was good, and he understood almost everything that was said.

"I was sure they knew one another," he said to himself. "And they are patriots. I suspected that, too. Well, that would suit father if he knew it."

Tom returned to his room and pondered the matter.

"I wonder who they are, anyway?" he asked himself.

"Well, they are brave fellows, whoever they are, and they saved our home from being burned, and doubtless they saved the lives of all of us, so I cannot have otherwise than friendly feelings toward them."

After breakfast next morning Dick called the colonel to one side.

"Colonel," he said, "I am going to ask you a question, and I hope you will be willing to answer it."

"Very well, Mr. Harper, I will do so if it is a question that I both can and should answer."

"One thing I will assure you of, sir, and that is, that you need have no fears to answer."

The colonel looked somewhat surprised.

"What is the question?" he asked.

"I wish to ask you which you are—patriot or loyalist?" Colonel Renfrow started and looked at Dick sharply.

He was silent for a few moments, and seemed to be pondering.

It was evident that he hesitated to answer.

Presently he asked: "Why do you wish to know?"

"I have a good reason, sir, and I will tell you what it is as soon as you answer my question."

The colonel seemed to make up his mind all of a sudden, and said decidedly:

"Very well. I will tell you the truth, sir. I am a patriot."

Dick extended his hand, which the colonel grasped.

"I am glad to hear you say that, sir," the youth said.

"Then you are——"

"A patriot, sir, like yourself."

"And the members of this party of strangers. I wonder what they are?"

"Patriots also, Colonel Renfrow."

"How do you know?"

"Because I am their commander."

"You their commander?" the colonel gasped.

"Yes, sir."

"But you came here alone, and they did not come till several hours later."

"True, but they are my men, just the same."

"How does it happen that you came here alone, then?"

"I came down here on a spying expedition. They came for the purpose of watching for marauding parties of red-coats and striking them blows. I thought it best that I should travel alone."

"Well, I'm glad to know that you are patriots, sir."

"And I am equally well pleased to know that you are a patriot."

"By the way, sir, your men seem to be rather young to be pitted against British veterans."

The youth smiled.

"My men are young, I know," he said. "They are, in fact, mere youths, but at the same time they are veterans, and have fought bravely in all the big battles of the North that have been fought up to the present time. Perhaps you may have heard of them. They are known as 'The Liberty Boys of '76.'"

"What!" exclaimed Colonel Renfrow, his eyes opening wide, "you don't mean to tell me that those young men are 'The Liberty Boys of '76'?"

"Yes, sir. I mean to tell you that very thing. You have heard of them, then?"

"Heard of them? Well, I should say I have! And you—then you must be Dick Slater, the famous scout and spy!"

The youth nodded assent.

"I am Dick Slater, captain of the company of 'Liberty Boys,' and have done something in the way of scouting and spying, but I don't know about the famous part of it."

"Well, well! Shake hands, Mr. Slater. I am proud to make your acquaintance."

The two shook hands heartily, and then Dick said:

"My reason for making ourselves known to you, Colonel Renfrow, is this: I wish to use your plantation as a sort of headquarters for my men, where they can stay when not after the redskins, and from which point they can strike out and make attacks on marauding bands of the enemy."

"You are more than welcome to do this, Mr. Slater. Consider that matter settled."

"Very well, and thank you, sir."

They talked a while longer, and then Dick went to the "Liberty Boys," and told them what the colonel said.

"Good!" cried Bob. "We will settle down here, and be ready to pounce upon any gangs of redcoats that may come fooling around in the neighborhood."

The youths were all very well pleased. They liked the place very well, and then, too, Margaret Renfrow was such a bright, beautiful girl that the majority of the youths had fallen in love with her. They were, therefore, pleased to think that they would be at the plantation more or less for some time, and there was sure to be quite a good deal of good-natured rivalry for the favor of the girl.

Presently Tom Renfrow approached and asked Dick to give him a few minutes of his time. The youth acquiesced, and Tom led the way to the edge of the timber, which was not more than a hundred yards distant.

"Now what did you wish to say to me?" asked Dick, with some show of curiosity.

"I wished to make a confession to you, Mr. Slater."

"A confession?"

"Yes. You told father, I believe, that you were made a prisoner on the island by the Masked Dozen, and that you were forced to swim from the island to the shore, at the risk of your life from the jaws of alligators."

"Yes, I told him about that. What about it?"

"Just this: I am one of the members of the band known as the Masked Dozen!"

CHAPTER VII.

SHOT FROM BEHIND.

Dick started, and stared at the young man in amazement.

"You a member of that band?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"But your father said it was a band that has a bad reputation, that it has robbed and pillaged and committed all kinds of depredations on the plantations in this part of the country."

"And that is the truth, Dick Slater."

"Then how comes it that you, the son of such fine people as Colonel Renfrow and his wife, are a member of such a band?"

Tom colored up, and a look of shame appeared on his face.

"I'll tell you just how it came about, Dick," he said. "I have for years been the associate of a young fellow—a neighbor, in fact, who is and always has been wild and unruly. He gradually acquired influence over me, and at last it got so I was almost as wild and reckless as he was. And then, when the war broke out, and neighbor turned against neighbor, and the British preyed on friend and foe alike, this friend of mine proposed to me that we organize a band and go to plundering and stealing. He said we could make ourselves rich before the war ended, and that then, when it was over, we would be enabled to go where we pleased and live like lords."

"I see," said Dick. "And you consented to do this?"

"I did. You see, I had run with him so long, and had become so reckless that I was ready for almost anything."

"I see. And so you organized the band."

"Yes. We went to work at once, and had little difficulty

in finding ten more young fellows—fellows who have been engaged in many a wild lark with us—and the band known as the Masked Dozen was organized, with this friend of mine as captain, while I am the lieutenant, and second in command."

"Well, well," said Dick. "Then you were one of those who forced me to make that terrible swim for life yesterday evening?"

The youth's tone was stern, and Tom hastened to say:

"Yes, Dick, but—I did not favor that at all; but of course I could not go against all the rest."

"No, of course not; it would have been useless."

"Absolutely."

"What is the name of the captain of this band?"

"Spencer Wharton."

"He was the one who wore the yellow mask?"

"Yes."

"Well, why did he have it in for me in such a manner?"

Tom shook his head.

"You have me there," he said. "I don't know why he seemed to desire your death to such an extent. Still, he was not so bitter until after you had knocked him senseless, if you will remember."

"True. It was after that that he seemed so fierce and bitter."

"Yes, and from what I know of him, what you did to him was quite sufficient to make him hunger for your heart's blood."

"He is a fierce fellow, then?"

"He is a demon, if ever there was one."

"So I should judge. No one save a fiend would force a human being to undergo what I was forced to yesterday evening."

"You are right."

"Well, Tom, if I may ask, what is your object in telling me this?"

"My object is twofold, Dick."

"Well?"

"I have made up my mind, first, to break loose from this band, to sever my connection with the Masked Dozen."

Instantly Dick reached out, and seizing the other's hand, shook it heartily.

"That is a good resolution, Tom," he said. "Stick to it, if not for your own sake, at least for the sake of your parents and for the sake of that sweet, beautiful sister of yours."

"Ah, Dick, that is the point. It is for her sake, mainly, that I have made the decision."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"How is that?"

"I will tell you. As you may suppose, each and every one of the members of the Masked Dozen is sworn to aid the others in every way in their power."

"I would suppose that some such oaths would be taken."

"Well, you will be able to understand the matter better when I tell you that Spencer Wharton has long been a suitor for my sister's hand."

"Ah," exclaimed Dick, with a start. "I begin to see what you are getting at."

"Yes. Well, he has long been a suitor for sister's hand, as I say, but she has never encouraged him. He was persistent, however, and it was not until Margaret had refused him three times that he accepted the answer as final, and even then he did not give up the idea of making her his wife. He simply gave up the thought of having her become his wife willingly."

"I understand," and Dick nodded.

"Sister, the last time she refused him, became vexed because of his insistence, and finally told him that she hated him, and did not wish him ever to come on the place again. This, of course, made him very angry, and he began planning to force her to marry him."

"The scoundrel!" said Dick.

"He is more than that. He is a fiend. He at once began working among the other members of the band, and soon won them over to agree to help him in his scheme, and he has concocted a plan to capture sister and carry her away and marry her by force."

"He is certainly a bold, and cold-blooded villain."

"Yes. When he had won all the others over, then he broached the subject to me. I told him I would not hear to anything of the kind."

"Quite right."

"I told him that had he been able to win her fairly I would not have objected, but that I would not be a party to such a scheme as he contemplated."

"What did he say to that?"

"He told me, coolly, that he did not expect me to give my aid to the affair, but that he did expect me to maintain a neutral position. He said that if I warned my sister, or did anything in any way to attempt to spoil his plans, I would be killed with as little compunction as if I were a mad dog."

"That is what I would naturally expect from such a scoundrel."

"Yes, and he would keep his word, too, if it was possible to do so."

"I have no doubt regarding that."

"You are right. He would kill me without the least compunction, and I must say that the majority of the other members of the band are not much better than Wharton."

"What do you wish me to do, Tom?" asked Dick.

"I'll tell you what I wish you to do. I wish you to permit me to join your company of 'Liberty Boys.'"

Dick was not surprised.

"Why do you wish to join us?" he asked. "Are you a patriot?"

"I am. But I will be frank with you, and say that my main reason for wishing to join your company is, first, to save my sister from the machinations of Spencer Wharton, and second, to insure my safety from the villain's wrath when he learns that I have deserted him and his band."

"Either reason is sufficient, Tom, and I shall be only too glad to number you as one of my 'Liberty Boys.'"

"Oh, thank you, Dick. You don't know how much better I feel. A great load has been taken off my shoulders."

"I can understand that. But you are on the right track, now, Tom, and there is no reason why you should not be happy from this day forward."

"I hope that such will be the case, Dick. I shall always regret my years of wildness, however."

"That cannot be helped now, and the best thing for you to do will be to forget all about it just as quickly as possible."

"That will be hard to do."

"Yes, but you can have very good success by living in the present, and not permitting yourself to think of the past."

"I shall try to do that."

"Of course your parents and sister do not know that you have been a member of this band, Tom?"

"No; but I have fancied that father suspected it."

"Perhaps not. At any rate, if you join my company of 'Liberty Boys,' and go with us, and fight for independence, he will know you are not a member, and will think that he was mistaken in his suspicions."

"True. That will be all right, for I would hate to have him know the truth."

"And now, about your sister, Tom. You had better warn her not to venture away from the vicinity of the house, had you not?"

"Yes, I'll warn her. I will tell her that I accidentally discovered that Wharton was plotting to carry her off and

force her to marry him, and she will not suspect how I learned it."

"That will be a good plan."

The two talked a few minutes longer, and then, just as they were on the point of leaving the timber and returning to the house, there came the sharp, whiplike crack of a pistol, and throwing up his arms, Tom uttered a gasping cry and fell forward upon his face.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN MCGRAW AND POMP.

"Some one has been listening, and likely it is a member of the Masked Dozen band," was the thought which flashed through Dick's mind, and whirling, he bounded in the direction from which the shot had sounded.

He suspected that the man who had fired the pistol-shot was Spencer Wharton himself, and in the hope that he might capture the scoundrel the youth exerted himself to get to the spot quickly.

"I have a score to settle with the scoundrel, myself," he thought, "and if I lay hands on him I will settle it right speedily."

The youth was unsuccessful in finding anyone, however. The scoundrel who had fired the shot had evidently taken to his heels and fled at the top of his speed.

"I'll let you go for the present," thought Dick, "in order that I may give Tom my attention. It may be that he is not fatally wounded, if taken care of in time."

He hastened back to where Tom lay, and made a quick examination.

"Thank goodness, he is not even seriously wounded," said Dick to himself. "He will be all right in a few minutes. The bullet simply inflicted a scalp-wound, and the concussion rendered him unconscious, but has not injured him to speak of. I will wait here until he comes to, as there is no need of alarming his parents and sister."

The youth chafed Tom's wrists and forehead, and soon the young man opened his eyes.

He stared up into Dick's face for a few moments, wonderingly, and then said:

"What happened?"

"Some one fired upon you, Tom."

"Ah, yes. I remember now. We were just going to start to the house."

"Yes."

The young man rose to a sitting posture and felt of his head.

"Am I hurt much?" he asked.

"Oh, no, not seriously."

"I'm glad of that. My head feels buzzy, though, and as big as a bushel-basket."

"It will soon get over that."

"I hope so."

"It will, though your head will doubtless feel more or less sore for a few days. The bullet cut through the scalp."

Tom now rose to his feet, but swayed dizzily. Dick took hold of the young man's shoulder, and steadied him.

"Can you walk, now, do you think?" he asked presently.

"I guess so."

"Very well, then. We will go to the house, and I will dress your wound."

They started, walking slowly, for Tom was still somewhat dizzy.

"Who do you think it was that fired on you?" asked Dick, who wished to get the young man's views on the subject, to see if they coincided with his own.

A sober look appeared on Tom's face.

"It was a member of the Masked Dozen band, you may be sure," he said.

"That is the way I figured it."

"Yes, and it would not surprise me if it were Spencer Wharton himself."

"I think that more than likely, Tom."

"Well, I am sorry that he has discovered that I have deserted them so soon, but it can't be helped, and they would have known it before long, anyway."

"Yes, it doesn't matter much, now, for he failed to kill you, and from now on you can be on your guard."

"True."

They soon reached the house, where Dick told Tom's parents and sister that some one had fired upon them from back in the timber, and the bullet had struck Tom, inflicting a scalp-wound. He did not tell them that the bullet was intended for Tom.

Mrs. Renfrow and Margaret hastened to get linen for bandages, and water and salve, and Dick, who was an expert at such work, soon dressed the wound, and got Tom feeling almost as good as new.

"Oh, thank you for your kindness, Mr. Slater," said Tom's mother gratefully.

"No thanks are necessary, Mrs. Renfrow," said Dick. "You see, it is really my duty to look after Tom's wound, for he is now one of my men."

"What is that you say? Tom one of your men?" exclaimed the astonished woman.

"Yes, mother," said Tom. "I have joined Mr. Slater's company of 'Liberty Boys,' and instead of putting in my time scooting around the country doing nothing I am going to settle down and help fight for the great cause."

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad," cried Margaret, and she threw her arms around her brother's neck and kissed him.

Colonel Renfrow had come up and had heard what Tom said, and his face brightened wonderfully, and into the stern eyes came a look of pleasure. He stepped quickly forward and took his son's hand and pressed it warmly.

"God bless you, Tom," he said, and then he whirled and strode away.

Tom gave Dick a meaning look, and there was a look on his face of almost happiness. He knew that he had lifted a load from his father's heart.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Margy," said Tom, and she accompanied him to the large sitting room, which was at that time vacant.

"What do you want, Tom?" asked Margaret.

"I wish to warn you, Margy."

"Warn me?"

"Yes."

"Of what, Tom?"

"Danger of capture, Margy."

"Why, who would wish to capture me, Tom, and why?" in surprise.

"Can you think of no one who would wish to do so, Margy?"

The girl thought awhile, and then shook her head.

"No," she said. "I can think of no one who would wish to capture me."

"Spencer Wharton!"

Margaret started, and gave utterance to a cry of amazement and dismay.

"You don't mean it, Tom?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Margy."

"And you say that Spencer Wharton is going to try to capture me and carry me away?"

"Yes."

"But for what purpose, brother? What would it avail him?"

"He thinks to force you to marry him."

The girl paled, and a look of horror came over her face.

"Surely there is some mistake, Tom," she murmured.

The youth shook his head.

"There is no mistake about it, Margy," he declared.

"Spencer Wharton has made up his mind that you shall be his wife, whether you are willing or not, and he is going to try to capture and carry you away, and force you to marry him."

"Oh, the fiend!"

"That's what he is, Margy."

"But how did you learn this, Tom?"

"I overheard him making his plans. Mart Wormsley is going to aid him in the attempt."

"Ah, he is a scoundrel, too, Tom."

"Yes, so he is"

"And you—you used to be—be friends of theirs, Tom." There was reproach in the tone, though mild; but, mild as it was, Tom felt it, and flushed and looked ashamed.

"I know I used to be their friends, Margy," he acknowledged, "but I am their friends no longer. Henceforth I am their enemies, and if they attempt to put their plan into effect, I will defeat them if I have to kill both."

"I am so glad that you will have nothing more to do with them, Tom, and I am even more glad that you have joined the company of 'Liberty Boys,' for you will be fighting for independence."

"I have been a heartless scapegrace, Margy, and have caused you and father and mother lots of trouble and many heart-pangs, but I shall do so no more. Henceforth I am going to be a true man, and you will have no cause to feel ashamed of me."

Margy kissed him, and there was a happy light in her eyes as she said:

"I'm so glad, Tom."

"And now, Margy, you must stay close to the house from now on," said Tom. "You must not give Spencer Wharton a chance to capture you."

"I will be very careful, Tom. I would rather die than fall into his hands, for, oh, I loathe and fear him."

"He is a dangerous man, Margy. He is conscienceless and cruel, and there is scarcely anything he is not capable of to carry out his own ends."

"I am sure of that."

"I more than half believe it was him that shot me a little while ago, Margy."

"Do you think so, Tom?"

"Yes. I was talking to Dick Slater, and telling him about Spencer Wharton, and how he was going to try to capture you and carry you away, and I think he was concealed near at hand, and heard me, and then, when I joined the 'Liberty Boys,' I think he made up his mind to get me out of the way, so as to keep me from interfering with his plans."

"I think it likely you are right, Tom; and oh, do be careful, for he may try again."

"I will be on the lookout for him, now, Margy."

Then the two went back and Margy went to her room, while Tom rejoined the "Liberty Boys."

As he did so two men, one a white man and a British officer, the other a negro, rode up to the piazza, and drew rein. The officer was Captain Morris McGraw and the negro was Pomp.

They saw and recognized Dick at once, and greeted him with pleasant nods.

"So you escaped both the alligators and the Indians, Mr. Harper?" remarked the captain.

"Yes, Captain McGraw," replied Dick. "And you and Pomp. I see you made your escape in safety, too. How did you manage it?"

"The members of the Masked Dozen band set us free this morning," was the reply, "and so we mounted my horse and yours, and crossing to the shore came here, as Pomp said he would guide me to his master's plantation."

"Well, they did not seem to have as much against you as they did against me, did they?"

"No; the leader—the fellow with the yellow mask, you know—he said that he would not have been so hard on you if you hadn't been so saucy and handled him so roughly."

"I supposed that was the reason he was so severe with me."

Just then Colonel Renfrow approached, and Dick introduced him to the captain, and the planter offered the British officer the hospitalities of the place, which invitation was promptly and gladly accepted.

"I am tired and almost starved," the captain said, "and with your kind permission will remain the rest of the day and to-night at your home, and will resume my journey to-morrow."

"You are welcome to remain as long as you wish, sir," said the colonel, with as much heartiness, seemingly, as he would have shown had the captain been a patriot instead of a redecoat.

While the captain was eating breakfast Dick had a conversation with the colonel, instructing him as to what he wished to make the British officer think regarding the Liberty Boys."

Dick thanked Pomp for bringing his horse to the plantation. "I feared I had lost my horse for good," he said.

"I t'ought dem fellers wid masks on deir faces'd keep de hoss, massa, but dey didn'," said Pomp.

When the captain had eaten breakfast he felt so much

better that he decided to continue his journey, and Dick and the "Liberty Boys" were glad that he came to this decision.

"Are you going my way, Mr. Harper?" the captain asked Dick.

"I don't think I will continue the journey to-day, captain," said Dick. "I am so broken up and unnerved over the experiences which I was forced to undergo by the members of that Masked Dozen band that I don't feel like traveling."

"Well, if my business was not urgent, I would not continue my journey so soon," the captain declared. "I don't blame you for wishing to stop here as long as possible, for the young lady of the house is very beautiful, I must say," and he looked at Dick and smiled knowingly.

The youth was willing the officer should think Margaret's beauty was what was holding him there, and so he pretended to look slightly confused.

"Oh, come now, don't joke a fellow, captain," he said.

"Oh, that's all right. I'd do as you are doing if I could afford to."

Then the officer beckoned to Dick, and the two stepped around the corner of the house.

"What do you think about this party of strangers, Mr. Harper?" he asked.

"I really don't know, Captain McGraw," replied Dick.

"Do you suppose they are rebels?"

"I really cannot say. They came in here, last night, and drove the Indians away, and that's all I know about them."

"Where did they come from?"

"They said they came from the north, and that's as much of an explanation as they seem willing to give."

"It seems rather strange, it appears to me."

"Yes. I think it seems rather strange, but they have not offered to molest any one here, so I hardly think they are vicious."

The captain's horse was brought around at this moment, and he shook hands with Dick, and bade him good-bye, and then he thanked Colonel Renfrow for his hospitality, and bidding him good-bye, the officer mounted and rode away.

Acting on a suggestion which Dick had made to Bob, the "Liberty Boys" had quietly bridled and saddled their horses, and they now mounted and rode away toward the south. This was done for the captain's benefit, as he could not fail to see them, and would think them gone for good.

An hour later the "Liberty Boys" came riding back, and they brought some news with them. They had seen a party of redcoats coming across the St. Johns River, and their

belief was that the party would come in the direction of the colonel's plantation.

"I left a couple of the boys to spy upon the redcoats, Dick," said Bob, "and if the enemy heads in this direction the boys will hasten on ahead and let us know."

"That was a good plan, Bob. How many of the redcoats do you think there are?"

"Oh, about fifty, I should say."

"Well, we ought to be able to capture the entire force, if it comes this way."

"I should think so."

Dick did some lively thinking, and at last a thought struck him. If the redcoats came he would want to be on hand to spoil their plans, if they intended to plunder the colonel's house, and in order to prevent this he felt that it would be a good plan to be right on the ground. In order to do this he decided that in case the two "Liberty Boys" came and reported that the enemy was coming he would have fifty of the youths black up like negroes, and take up their quarters in the negroes' cabins.

"I will have two bands of men—one black, the other white," he told Bob, to whom he told his plans, "and I will black up and command the black band, while you will have charge of the white band, which will have a position just within the edge of the timber, where it can come quickly, if needed."

"That will be a good scheme, Dick," said Bob, who was always taken with anything original and novel. "Say, that would be a surprise to the redcoats—to have what they supposed to be cowardly negroes suddenly turn out to be fighters, and force them to surrender."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLACK BAND.

"Boys, one of our men is a traitor."

Deep in the woods, perhaps two miles from the plantation of Colonel Renfrow, down in the bottom of a narrow ravine, was a small log cabin. In this cabin were eleven men, and it was one of these who uttered the words given above.

The men were not very far along in years. Their average age would not have exceeded twenty-one years, and the majority of them were smooth-faced, and looked like youths of eighteen or nineteen.

A close study of the faces would have revealed the fact

that while some of the young men were fairly good-looking, their faces had a dissipated look, and in the most of the cases the predominating expression was either weakness or cruelty, and in many cases both these traits were mingled in the one face.

These young men were the members of the band known as the Masked Dozen, though they did not now have their masks on, and the speaker was Spencer Wharton, the captain of the band.

He was not unhandsome, but his face was cruel-looking and the man's air was one of recklessness. His face showed the marks left by dissipation and unrestrained passions.

When he made the statement that one of their number was a traitor, the members of the band looked at one another with an air of suspicion. Noticing this, Wharton said:

"Look around you, and see who is missing."

There was a short period of silence, and then there came in a chorus:

"Tom Renfrow."

Wharton bowed.

"And he is the traitor," he said.

"How do you know, captain?" asked one. "The fact that he is not here does not prove that he is a traitor, for he has been absent from our gatherings many times before."

"So he has, Mart. But I have other and absolute proof that he is a traitor."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"What is the proof?"

"I heard him talking to that fellow who escaped from our hands yesterday evening, on the island, and he told the fellow everything—all about us, and about my plans for making his sister my wife. Everything, in fact."

There was a chorus of growls, and the man addressed as Mart said:

"Well, that does prove that he is a traitor, sure enough."

"Yes, so it does, and you know what the penalty is that attaches to such action?"

"Death!" in a threatening chorus.

"You are right. And death is what must be dealt out to Tom Renfrow."

"That ought to be easy enough to accomplish," said one.

"All we will have to do will be to mask ourselves, ride to his father's plantation, seize him, and bring him away."

Wharton shook his head.

"It will not be so simple a matter as all that," he said.

"Why not?"

"For the reason that there is a party of men there outnumbering us ten to one."

"A party there of more than a hundred men?" in surprise.

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

The leader smiled.

"You would never guess," he said.

"Then tell us," in impatient tones.

"I will, but first, who do you suppose the fellow was that we made swim from the island to the shore yesterday evening?—the scoundrel who struck me!" A fierce light shone in the fellow's eyes as he ended.

"Haven't the least idea."

"We couldn't guess, captain."

"Who was he?"

"Tell us."

The captain looked around over the men, and showing his teeth in a smile, said:

"You have all heard of a young fellow up North who by his daring and bravery earned the name of 'The Champion Spy of the Revolution,' haven't you?"

"Yes, yes," was the cry, "but surely that young fellow wasn't——"

"That young fellow was no other than Dick Slater, the 'Champion Spy of the Revolution,' and also the captain of a company of young fellows known as 'The Liberty Boys of '76.'"

"We've heard of them," said one, with a nod.

"Say, Spencer," exclaimed the fellow called Mart, "you don't mean to tell us that the party of men that is now at the plantation of Tom's father is the company of 'Liberty Boys,' do you?"

Wharton nodded.

"That is just what I do mean to say," he said. "They are the 'Liberty Boys,' and nobody else."

There was silence for a few moments, during which time the members of the band looked at one another dubiously.

"If that is the case," said Mart, presently, slowly and dubiously, "we would hardly dare ride up to the plantation and attempt to make Tom a prisoner."

"You are right. It would be suicide," said Spencer, "all the more so because he has joined the 'Liberty Boys.'"

"He has?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him talking to Dick Slater, I told you, and he

proposed that he join the 'Liberty Boys,' and was accepted as a member."

"That settles it, then."

"Yes, so it does."

"Why didn't you put a bullet through him, Spencer?"

"I did try."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"And failed?"

"Yes. I thought I had succeeded; he dropped in his tracks when I fired, and I got away from there lively, for I knew that fellow, Slater, would be after me, hotfoot; but I paused where I could keep watch, and not long afterward I saw the two walking to the house."

"You didn't kill Tom, after all?"

"No. I aimed at his head, and I figure it that I simply grazed the top of his head, and knocked him senseless, but that he was not seriously wounded."

"That was hard luck."

"Yes. But still, I would rather have the pleasure of helping hang him, and now we will capture him and end him in that way."

"Yes, but won't it be a difficult matter to capture him?"

"Oh, yes, it will be difficult, but it is not an impossibility by any means."

"How are you going to go about it?"

"I will tell you." And then Wharton explained his plans to his men, who nodded their heads and seemed to think the plans would result in success.

"And after we have captured and made an end of Tom Renfrow, we will capture his sister, and I will put my plan of marrying her into execution," said Wharton, with a vicious look in his eyes.

* * * * *

An hour after the return of the "Liberty Boys" to Colonel Renfrow's plantation the two youths who had been left behind to do scout and spy work rode up and announced that the party of redcoats was coming.

"How long before it will get here, do you think?" asked Dick.

"Oh, half an hour, I should judge. They are riding slowly."

"That will give us plenty of time," said Dick, and then he gave his orders at once. He divided the "Liberty Boys" into two parties, and sent Bob into the edge of the timber with one, and then the members of the other party proceeded to black themselves up till they looked very much like negroes at a short distance.

This done, they went to the cabins, which stood a hun-

dred yards or so distant from the house, and mingled with the negroes. It would have taken a keen eye, indeed, to have discerned that more than half the number in the vicinity were not genuine negroes.

Dick remained at the house and told Colonel Renfrow his plans, and the planter promised to do all he could to assist in the work of capturing the redcoats.

At last the redcoats appeared in sight, and Dick made his way to the nearest cabin, and watched the approach of the enemy.

They halted in front of the house, and their leader, a captain, dismounted and stepped up onto the piazza.

"Are you the owner of this plantation?" the officer asked, addressing the colonel, who had advanced to meet him.

"I am, sir," was the reply.

"What is your name?"

"Renfrow, sir—Colonel Renfrow, at your service."

"Where did you get your title?" was the somewhat sneering question.

"I earned it, sir," was the dignified reply.

"Indeed? In this war?"

"No, sir. In the French and Indian war."

"Then you have taken no part in this war?"

"No, sir."

"What are you, Whig or loyalist?"

"I am neutral, sir."

"Humph," with a contemptuous air. "Neutral, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"That will not do at all, sir."

"Why not?"

"For the very simple reason that I, as representing my sovereign, King George, am not willing to accept you as being neutral. If you are not for the king you are against him, and I shall act toward you as toward an enemy."

"I beg of you not to be hasty, captain," said the colonel, calmly.

"I shall do nothing hastily. At present, myself and men are very much fatigued from long riding, and we are very hungry as well. Give orders to your negroes to prepare us a good dinner at once."

"Very well, sir. Where will you have it served?"

"Is there not room in the house?"

"By using two or three rooms, yes, sir."

"I'll tell you what you do. Have a table set for six in your dining-room. The dinner for the main portion of my force may be served under those three large trees in your back yard."

"Very well, sir," and saluting, the colonel entered the house to give the orders for the preparing of the meal. The captain and five of the men dismounted and stepped up on the piazza and took seats, while the rest of the redcoats rode around to the rear of the house and yelled to the negroes to come and take care of the horses.

The real negroes came hurrying forward and led the horses to the stable and tied them in and around the building, and proceeded to give them some feed. The soldiers threw themselves down on the grass in the shade of the trees, and made preparations to take it easy and enjoy themselves.

They lighted their pipes and smoked, talked, and laughed boisterously. So secure and safe did they feel that they did not pay any attention to what was going on around them, and Dick Slater and his black band did not have any difficulty in stealing up and surrounding the redcoats before they knew what was happening.

The first intimation the British soldiers had that they were in danger was when the black band by a sudden, quick movement, surrounded them and presented pistols at their heads, with the words, uttered in stern, ringing tones by Dick Slater:

"Surrender, and without making the least noise, or you are dead men."

The instant Dick and his portion of the force made the move described, Bob and his men came rushing to the scene, and when the redcoats saw the white-faced youths they understood all.

"Y-you are not—not—negroes at all," gasped one of the redcoats.

"No, we are white men, and you will do well to hold up your hands and surrender at once. We are 'The Liberty Boys of '76,' and we are not to be fooled with."

"The 'Liberty Boys!'"

"Great Guns!"

"It's all up with us!"

"Don't shoot!"

"We surrender!"

Such were a few of the exclamations from the redcoats, and up went their hands with alacrity.

"That is good," said Dick, approvingly. "You are wise in surrendering, for if you had attempted to show fight we would have killed every one of you."

Then Dick gave orders that the hands of the prisoners be bound together behind their backs, and this was speedily done.

The entire force, with the exception of the six redcoats

in the houses, were now prisoners, and it only remained to secure the six.

"Surround the houses," ordered Dick, and leaving a dozen to stand guard over the prisoners, the youths surrounded the house.

The captain of the redcoats and his five companions—who, as it turned out, were Tory citizens of St. Augustine who had come with the British for the sport of the thing—had entered the houses, and were in the dining-room, just beginning their meal, and selecting six men from among his black band, Dick led the way into the house. The six held muskets in their hands, and when they reached the dining-room door Dick opened it and entered quickly, the black band following.

Never was there a more astonished set of men than the six redcoats when the members of the black band stepped into the room and covered them with the muskets. They stared in mute horror.

It was a tableau worthy the brush of an artist.

"W-what d-does this m-mean?" gasped the captain.

"It means that you are our prisoners," replied Dick coolly. "Surrender, or die."

"What folly!" sneered the officer, he having quickly regained his self-possession. "You shall pay dearly for this joke, young man. My men are near at hand, and each and every one of you fellows shall stretch hemp."

"My dear captain, your men are near at hand, I am aware, but they are not in a position to render you assistance or do us any harm."

"Why not?" staring, and a startled look came in his eyes.

"For the reason that they are prisoners, sir. Hold up your hands."

The six men did so, the captain fuming as he did so.

"It is not, cannot be true," he cried. "How could six men have captured fifty? You are simply telling a falsehood, but it will avail you nothing to make prisoners of us, for my men will speedily free us."

"Remove their weapons," ordered Dick, paying no attention to the captain's words, and one of the youths disarmed the six.

This done, their hands were tied together behind their backs.

"Now, come to the window and look out," said Dick, leading the way to a window which looked out in the rear of the house.

The captain and his five companions obeyed, and cries of anger and dismay escaped their lips as they saw the entire British force sitting around, under the trees, with

their hands bound, and guards standing near. Perhaps fifty of the "Liberty Boys," some white and some blacked up, were in sight, and the captain, giving utterance to an oath, asked:

"What force is that out there?"

"My force," was the calm reply.

"Your force?"

"Yes."

"Well, who are you?"

"My name is Dick Slater."

The six started, and exclamations escaped their lips. It was evident that they had heard of the famous patriot scout and spy.

"Are you really Dick Slater?" asked the captain.

"I am, sir."

"Then this force out here is——"

"The Liberty Boys of '76."

The six looked at one another in dismay.

"What are you doing down here in Florida?" asked the officer.

"Capturing redcoats," was the prompt reply.

The officer bit his lips, and it was evidently only by a great effort that he kept from uttering bitter oaths.

After a few moments he turned away from the window, saying:

"Well, are you going to starve us? We are hungry, and would like to eat our dinner."

"You shall eat all you want," said Dick, and the men were allowed to take seats at the table and finish the interrupted meal, their arms being freed for the purpose.

They being unarmed, Dick had no fear of their doing anything.

In the meantime food had been taken to the redcoats out under the trees, and they ate while guarded by fifty of the "Liberty Boys," who stood over them with leveled pistols.

The question now came up of what should be done with the prisoners, and it was solved by taking them upstairs and placing them in three vacant rooms, and placing a guard over them.

"Now, what are you going to do, Dick?" asked Bob, when this had been attended to.

"I shall start at once for St. Augustine, Bob."

"To-day, you mean?"

"Yes. I want to get that part of the work done as quickly as possible, for there is danger that a large force of the British might come this way and rescue their comrades whom we have captured, and I don't want that to happen."

"Of course not. But are you going to take the prisoners to Savannah, Dick?"

"Yes, that is my intention."

Half an hour later, having given his instructions, Dick took his departure, and having crossed the St. Johns River on the flatboat, he struck out in the direction of St. Augustine.

He succeeded in reaching St. Augustine in safety, and managed to enter the town without being suspected of being a rebel spy.

Once in the town, the youth's work was more than half completed, and he easily secured such information as he was searching for, and when this had been accomplished, he hastened to shake the dust of the town off his feet.

When he got back to Colonel Renfrow's plantation he found the colonel and his wife and daughter very much alarmed on account of the disappearance of their son and brother Tom.

"How long has he been gone?" asked Dick, an anxious look on his face.

"About two hours," was the reply.

"And some of the negroes say he was seized by some men with masks on their faces and carried away," explained the colonel. "That is what makes us so anxious, Mr. Slater, for we are inclined to believe that he has fallen into the hands of the Masked Dozen."

"It is likely that is the case," said Dick. "Well, we must try to find Tom at once."

"Yes, but you have no means of knowing where they have taken him," said Mrs. Renfrow, her face pale and drawn.

"You are right, but we will scatter, and search in every direction," said Dick. "I should think that one hundred of us ought to be able to find him if he is anywhere within a reasonable distance of the plantation."

The "Liberty Boys" were just on the point of starting out to search for Tom when Pomp, the negro, came running up. He was panting and almost out of breath, and could hardly speak, but managed to gasp out:

"Uf yo' wants ter—sabe—Massa Tom—yo' hed bettah come—erlong ob me—right erway!"

"Do you know where the scoundrels took him?" asked Dick eagerly.

"Yes, I—follered dem—de raskals wid de masks ober deir faces—an' I done seed whar dey took Massa Tom."

"Where did they take him, Pomp?"

"Ter er cabin—ober—in de timber."

"How far from here?"

"'Bout two miles, massa."

"How many of the men with masks on were there?"

"Leben, massa Dick."

"Then there is no need of so many of us going after them. Twenty will be enough." And Dick quickly specified who should go, and the party set out, leaving the majority of the "Liberty Boys" behind. Pomp was guide, of course, and he hastened his steps, for he told Dick as they walked along that one of the men was threatening what he was going to do with Tom.

"Was he the one with the yellow mask on?" asked Dick.

"Yes, dat's de berry feller, Massa Dick; an' he wuz tellin' Massa Tom dat he wuz gwyne ter hang 'im ter er tree; so I guess es how't we'd better hurry all we kin."

This was Dick's idea, too, and they moved through the timber at a lively pace, and it did not take very long for them to reach the vicinity of the cabin.

As they came in sight of it, twelve men emerged from the cabin and made their way to a huge tree standing a short distance from the door. Eleven of the men wore masks on their faces. The twelfth had no mask, and this one was a prisoner, his arms being bound behind his back.

This was Tom Renfrow, of course, and the eleven men who had him a prisoner in their midst were the members of the band known as the Masked Dozen.

The party came to a stop under a limb which extended straight out from the main body of the tree, and a rope was fastened around Tom's neck, and the other end was thrown over the limb in question.

"Now, then, Tom Renfrow," said Spencer Wharton, in a cold, merciless voice, "your time has come."

"Perhaps so," was the cool reply.

"There is no 'perhaps' about it. You are a prisoner in our midst, and no one who takes any interest in your welfare has the least idea of your whereabouts, or, indeed, that you are in danger."

"Perhaps so."

"Bah! Tom Renfrow, you are a traitor!"

"And Spencer Wharton, you are a scoundrel!" was the cool retort.

"Pull down on that rope a bit, boys, and let him see how it feels," growled Wharton; "he is altogether too saucy, and some of it should be taken out of him."

The men obeyed, tightening the rope to such an extent that the intended victim was partially choked.

"Now then, Tom Renfrow, I guess you won't be so chipper and saucy," remarked Wharton triumphantly. "You know how the rope feels already, and you are to die the death of a traitor."

"I would rather die than remain a member of your band," was the dauntless reply.

"You will die, and very soon, Tom Renfrow, and then my next move will be to capture your sweet and beautiful sister and carry her off and force her to become my wife—ha, ha, ha! How do you like the thoughts of that, Tom?"

A fierce light came into the eyes of the youth, and he glared at Wharton with intense hatred.

"You are a fiend, Spencer Wharton," he said. "But you will not be permitted to carry out your plans. My sister will have plenty of friends to take care of her, even after I am gone, and you will find that you cannot make a success of your scheme."

"I suppose you have reference to that gang of young fellows who call themselves the 'Liberty Boys?'" remarked Wharton sarcastically.

"Yes, and their leader knows all about you, Spencer Wharton, and he has a grudge against you for forcing him to swim the gauntlet of the alligators, and will make an end of you as sure as he lays eyes on you."

"Bah! I fear him not. If we meet again it will be a dear meeting for him."

"Do you think so, Spencer Wharton?" queried a cool voice, coming seemingly from right behind him, and he whirled with a snarl of rage—to find himself and comrades surrounded by a party of at least twenty youths, all with pistols out and levelled.

The speaker was Dick Slater, and as a cry of joy escaped the lips of Tom Renfrow a curse escaped the lips of Spencer Wharton.

"Surrender!" cried Dick. "Throw up your hands or you are dead men!"

"Don't surrender, boys!" cried Wharton, jerking a pistol out of his belt. "Fight to the death! Better death than capture!"

"Fire!" cried Dick, and the "Liberty Boys" obeyed, firing a volley which was so deadly that every one of the members of the Masked Dozen band fell to the ground either dead or dying.

"Oh, curse you—curse you!" almost shrieked Wharton and he tried to level the pistol at Dick, with the intention of shooting him. One of the youths kicked the weapon out of the wounded desperado's hand, however, and he was forced to content himself with giving utterance to a volley of curses.

The rope was removed from Tom's neck, and his arms freed, and even before he had finished explaining how he had been made a prisoner, the wounded desperadoes were dead.

The band had been wiped out at one blow.

It was decided to bury the men, and this was done, a spade being found in the cabin. And when this had been done, Tom showed Dick where the gold and silver that had stolen by the band was hidden.

It was under the floor of the cabin, in one corner, and as they had no desire to return to the spot, they proceeded to unearth the treasure.

It was placed in a bag which was found in the cabin, and the youths were on the point of starting for the plantation when Bob Estabrook, who had been outside, scouting around, came in with the information that a party of Indians had surrounded the cabin, and were advancing slowly but surely toward it.

"How large a party do you think it is, Bob?" asked Dick.

"It is hard to say, Dick. There may be fifty of the red rascals, and there may not be more than a score."

"Well, be they twenty or fifty, I think we can give them all they want," said Dick grimly, and then he told the boys to get ready to give the redskins a warm reception.

"Let the door remain open," he said, "and stand back out of range, so as to avoid being hit by arrows. Then when the Indians approach close, give it to them from muskets and pistols."

Closer still came the redskins. The leaders were almost to the open door, and then Dick gave the signal for action.

Instantly the "Liberty Boys" leaped into a position where it was possible for them to see the Indians through the open doorway, and then, crash! roar! a volley rang out.

There were only about thirty Indians in the party, and the volley killed a dozen at least, and the rest, with wild yells of terror and anger, turned and fled without firing even one flight of arrows. They had expected to find the cabin empty, and to find it filled with youths who could deal out death so liberally was demoralizing to say the least.

"What do you think?" asked Bob. "Will they come back?"

"I hardly think so, Bob," was the reply.

"Then we might as well go?"

They set out at once, and made their way in the direction of the plantation. They kept a sharp lookout for the Indians, of course, but saw nothing of them, and got safely back to the plantation without having experienced any further adventures.

To say that Tom's parents and sister were delighted when they saw Tom again, alive and well, is stating the case mildly, and they gave Dick Slater great credit for what he had done, though he entered a disclaimer, and said that

the thanks were really due Pomp, who had followed the desperadoes and seen where they took Tom.

"But for Pomp we would not have found Tom in time to save his life," Dick declared, and Colonel Renfrow promptly rewarded the colored man by making him a free man.

Pomp looked a bit dubious when told that henceforth he was free, and could go and come as he pleased. "See heah," he said, "I dunno 'bout dis heah free bizness. I doan want g'way frum de plantation, Massa Kunnel, an' rudder'n do dat I'll stay er slabe, uv hit's all de same ter yo'."

"You may stay, Pomp, of course, if you wish," was the reply. "I shall be glad to have you do so, but I will pay you wages for your work."

"An' kin I hab Elizy ter be my ole woman, Massa?"

"Yes, if she'll have you, Pomp. And if she accepts you she shall be free, also."

"Hurray, Massa Kunnel. I'se de happiest nigger in all ob Floridy, so I am," and away Pomp went to ask Eliza the momentous question. She must have said yes, for the next time they saw Pomp there was a huge grin on his face.

There were two more happy ones on the plantation, too; they were Frank Davis, one of the "Liberty Boys," and a fine, handsome fellow, and Margaret Renfrow, they having fallen in love with each other, and before the "Liberty Boys" left the plantation they plighted their troth, the wedding, it being understood, to take place as soon as the war was over.

The "Liberty Boys" had finished their work in that vicinity, and returned to Savannah, taking the British officer and soldiers with them as prisoners of war, and later on they were exchanged for some patriots in the hands of the British.

THE END.

The next number (89) of "The Liberty Boys of '76" will contain "THE LIBERTY BOYS' 'HURRY CALL'; OR, A WILD DASH TO SAVE A FRIEND," by Harry Moore.

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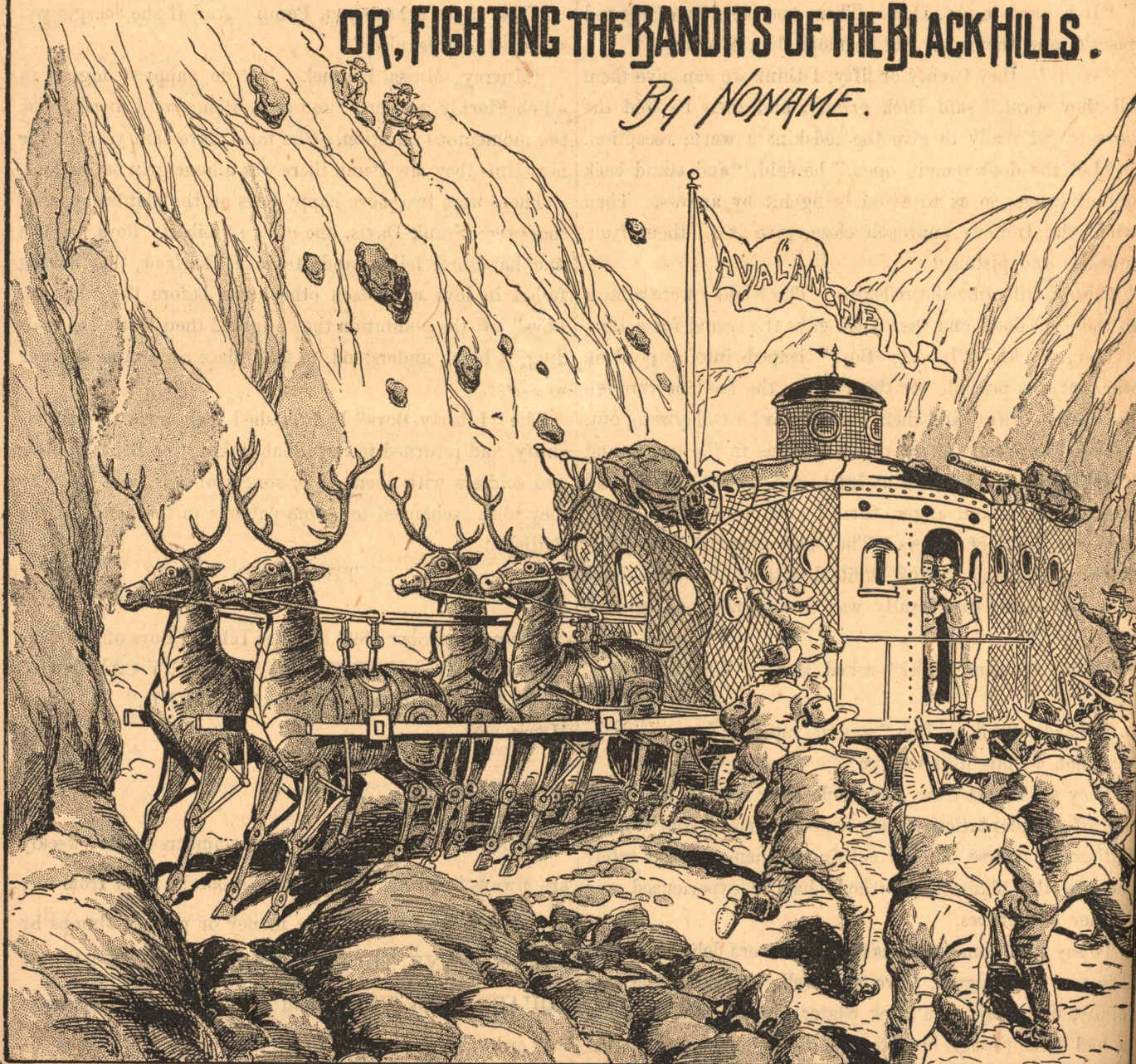
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